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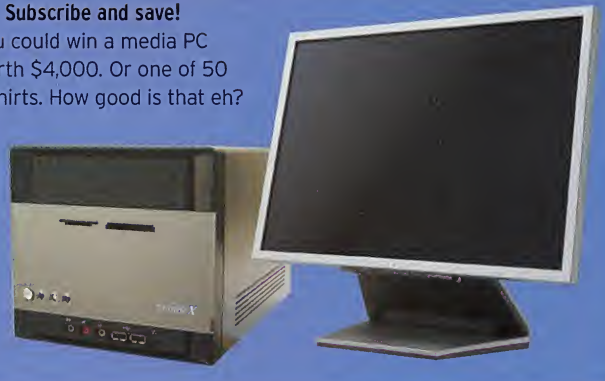

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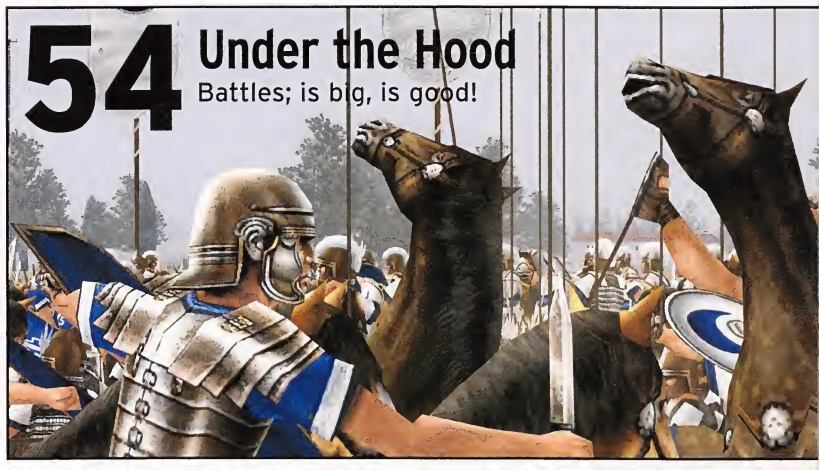

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Editorial

No method behind the madness

Game publishers make baffling decisions on a regular basis, whether it's a particular feature in a game's design or the lack of marketing for a particularly good game. Usually we react to these incidents with a shrug and a smile as if it was inevitable – "Oh those crazy game publishers" we say, rolling our eyes. It is rare to encounter one so astoundingly ill-conceived it genuinely leaves you breathless. Yet this month we witnessed one such decision: the cancellation of Sam & Max: Freelance Police.

Nearly ten years after the original Sam & Max tickled the funny bones of adventure gamers everywhere, LucasArts chose last year to revive the fondly remembered detective duo. It was to be a sequel that retained the look, feel and – most importantly – spirit of the original. It was to be a point-and-click adventure updated with slick visuals yet imbued with the same razor sharp wit and twisted black humour. It was to be developed with considerable input from many of those who worked on the first game. It was to be Sam & Max 2 in every conceivable sense.

Unlike the other similarly ill-fated revival, Full Throttle: Hell on Wheels, which adopted extensive action sequences and beat 'em up routines on its eventually aborted route onto cross-platform development, LucasArts had always insisted Sam & Max 2 would remain true to the genre, its platform and its history. Indeed, you got the impression the studio felt the game's chief selling point was that it was a point-and-click graphic adventure.

So what was the reason given for its cancellation in early March? The market conditions weren't right for a graphic adventure on PC. But, hang on, how was the market any different when development on the game began around twelve months ago? Was April 2003 really some sort of now-vanished golden age of adventure gaming? It simply beggars belief that LucasArts would not only make this decision but actually expect us to buy the reason given. Nothing has changed in the marketplace with regard to adventure gaming; if the market conditions were okay a year ago, why should they be any different now? And of course, how will those market conditions ever change if big publishers like LucasArts keep canceling eagerly awaited projects?

There are now rumours of a Monkey Island remake. Can you guess what's going to happen to that? I think I can.

In happier news, you may have noticed this is our 99th issue. Being nearly eight years old is not typically the cause for much celebration and, well, of course in this case it isn't either. But if you've been doing your maths then you'll realise that next issue is our 100th. And THAT is genuine cause for celebration. There may even be party hats.

So to commemorate seven and four-fifths years... I mean, one hundred issues of Australia's best-selling games magazine, we have a few special things planned, some of which I can tell you about here.

For one, we will be covermounting 100 copies of the full version of Far Cry, Ubisoft's Gold Award winning first-person shooter, distributed at random in the DVD edition of the 100th issue. For free. That means 100 lucky readers will get their regular PCPP DVD plus a $90 game for free. Did you hear that? For free.

For two, I will be traveling to the head office of Valve Software in Seattle, Washington, to bring you the latest news on – what else? – Half-Life 2. Assuming all goes according to plan (I'm writing this just hours before stepping onto the plane!), I'll be chatting with the team and getting the chance to actually play it. You'll be able to read my impressions next issue.

For three, we want to find Australia's Most Hardcore Gamer. To do so, we'll present an exhaustive and in-depth quiz spanning not only the history of PCPP but the history of PC gaming. It'll be tough, my friends, but it needs to be. And if you do survive and claim the crown as Australia's Most Hardcore Gamer, you'll win a new PC worth a blistering $10,000. Good luck – you'll need it.

For four, we'll... but no, I've said too much already. We need to keep a few surprises up our sleeves. You'll find out for yourself on May 5. Until then, enjoy THIS issue...

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KICK-ASS HAIRCUT

For the world of FPS this year is looking hopeful, more than hopeful it's looking great. Unless there is another leak we should be seeing four major titles sometime this year - Half-Life 2, Doom 3, STALKER and Far Cry. With all of these games offering pretty much the same sort of things, one begins to wonder how people who only have enough hard earned cash to buy one of these suckers is going to choose between them. Half-Life 2 and Doom 3 I think are more highly anticipated than the other two so it will most likely be a battle between Far Cry and STALKER for third or maybe even second place (you all know you're going to buy Half-Life 2 regardless, so it takes care of first).

So you walk into your local games store and see STALKER and Far Cry sitting side-by-side on the shelf. After you've finished reading the blurbs, you pin your decision on how the sucker looks and I'm sorry to say that so far Far Cry beats STALKER hands down. I've seen screenshots of both and played the Far Cry demo, and I wonder if STALKER will be able to compete with the other titles on a graphical level. STALKER's models seem a little Half-Life-ish compared to those of Far Cry. The developer really should have ditched the hood on the main character and chucked him a helmet or some totally kick-ass haircut and some nice looking shades to go with it. In the end it will mainly come down to gameplay of course, but it's too late to realise your mistake when you've already bought the goddamned thing.

David Bradbury

Here's a thought: don't buy any game based on how good it looks in the screenshots. Wait for the PCPP review instead. Oh, and anyone who thinks STALKER can't compete graphically is really splitting hairs. You may not appreciate STALKER's muted aesthetic, but technically it's very impressive.

STREET NAKED

I need to say something of originality. Can it really be that difficult to come up with innovative locations? Man, if I have to break into one more goddamned base, missile silo, underground bunker or 'secret installation' I'm gonna scream and run down the street naked.

Do you remember Duke Nukem? You got to walk around city streets complete with shops containing fully kitted out interiors (Well, a couple of shops – Ed). How many FPS games feature a modern city street like that? Man, add some pedestrians, a four wheel drive with a bull bar... let the fun begin.

It seems to me that each game you buy has a fair degree of filler levels that do little to excite your sense of adventure. We need more adventure games where you need to venture across vast deserts to unknown oases and descend into the depths of the ancient ruins there. Journey to the centre of the earth before finding a portal to Mars. On Mars you must climb to the top of Maat mons where you find more alien ruins. Something that will inspire all god forsaken underground bunkers to hell.

Do you remember the level in Halo where you are standing in a small lake and there is a crashed transport ship close by with its radio sounding off? The swamp levels in FAKK 2? The Jedi Temple in Jedi Outcast? Brilliant! But where are the rest?

Terry Adams

We're inclined to agree. Except for the bit about FAKK 2. Surely there was nothing memorable about that game?

TARGET PIXELS

Nice to see a mature letter on an issue not just a "consoles are bad, my game is better than yours" whinge! I am referring to Ugmotic's little rant in PCPP#97. Point taken. Games can only give an impression of war. Or life for that matter. I've talked to a few Viet vets. Nothing in any game can even begin to convey the fear of being under fire. And true... pushing a mouse is nothing like firing a real gun. But one thing disappoints me, the comment at the end of the letter, "Are you listening America?"

One fault of the games press is that they agree with Ugmotics comments with sage nodding of heads, but what if you showed them a hunting game? Somehow, if the target pixels represent an animal, then the game is

flawed and only a redneck would play such a game. Then begins a rant about how disgusting this behaviour is, as if the game is a real representation of hunting. No, it's all about control systems, as Ugmotic so nicely put it. Substitute animals as targets in any first-person shooter and you have a hunting game, if you don't think you are playing one already. I think the games press might be a little more convincing if they were not so precious when faced with a hunting game.

William Arnold

There is a certain degree of hypocrisy, that's true. As far as hunting games go, however, PCPP has always denigrated them for being piss-poor games. The hunting aspect just provides some easy ammunition for cheap gags rather than any genuine disgust.

RAIDED WITH APPROVAL

Having read the article "Kazaa shuts down Kazaa Lite" in PCPP#96 my jaw couldn't help dropping to my feet. Here's a company shutting down rival software due to copyright infringements when the software itself is the bane of music artists around the world. Obviously Sharman Networks don't care about user privacy with all the spyware running rampant in KMD, while there's an option to register your Kazaa program, would you feel comfortable to giving this company your name, address and any other sort of information? They ARE more than willing to spy on you for a profit, after all. Who's to say that they aren't selling the information of registered users to the RIAA?

Sharman Networks released a statement on February 6th, 2004 when their Sydney offices were raided with approval from the Federal Court of Australia; "It is a gross misrepresentation of Sharman's business to suggest that the company in any way facilitates or encourages copyright infringement." Uh-uh, right. "Sharman bought the Kazaa software two years ago with the express purpose of building it into a legitimate channel for the distribution of licensed, copyright protected content which in turn financially benefits artists." Two years down the track and where's this

licensed content that financially benefits artists? Who's working on implementing this?
3D Realms?!?
This is just completely absurd in my opinion, the fact that a judge would rule that a program whose sole purpose is to distribute pirated content as being intellectual property is beyond me. Copyrighting a program that infringes the basic principle of copyright is laughable. What's next, will warez crews suddenly be copyrighting their latest hacked release, and taking each other to court for the theft of their "intellectual property"?

Gentil Fernandes

Nice dig at Duke Nukem Forever.

STUPID TRIPWIRES

I have become very disturbed by all the hype and praise for Call of Duty. I would be perhaps the biggest unofficial fan of Medal of Honour: Allied Assault on the planet and it whoops CoD hands down. I could put up with one "pro-CoD" article but two is too many. Using words like "doubtlessly the best WWII based shooter available" makes me jump around the room shouting abuse at my flatmate for reading it to me (he is also of the same opinion as me). You said that CoD features excellent AI. Ahahaha! Did you even play the same game as me (Ah, that old chestnut - Ed)? Do you understand that the letter "A" stands for artificial and "I" most importantly, stands for intelligence. CoD had no AI, it was 98% pre-determined/pre-scripted annoyance on a stick. Every enemy was a ticking time bomb triggered by the constant supply of invisible

trip-wires set up by the Nazis. These stupid tripwires would still make my screen fill up with Nazis even if I had just cleared out a whole section of a facility, they would still predictably teleport themselves in and be in a perfectly magical "high ground surrounding" as I would run through the corridor below. Let's say they got the better of me that time, well I could look forward to EXACTLY the same fight at EXACTLY the same spot next time, yay! From start to finish, it was one big pre-scripted movie, and I was just the clumsy fella unleashing the Nazis via StarGate. Or whatever technology the developers think they had back then. Sorry I am probably not going to be able to string this together into one nice letter because my mind keeps jumping to SOME of the many disappointments I encountered (*You're right…I've snipped numerous examples of allegedly poor AI and unrealistic situations to be found in Call of Duty - Ed*).

Troy Pinkerton

Glad you enjoyed MOHAA, Troy, but we're adamant Call of Duty is the far superior game. You seem to be confused by notions of AI and scripted events. They are not the same thing, though scripted events often give the illusion of AI as you seem to allude to.
We're planning a closer, deeper look at artificial intelligence in an upcoming feature. Hopefully this will clear up what is a commonly misunderstood matter.

THEY SOLD OUT

I just read your review of Deus Ex 2 in PCPP#97, and was hugely surprised at the high score it got. I recently got the game, and although I haven't played through much yet, I am frustrated with the performance issues. I have a P4 2.4Ghz, 512mb PC2700 RAM, Radeon 9600 Pro and I can't run anything above

800x600 with any settings above medium, and AA off. The 1.1 patch does nothing to help. I've also been to a few forums, and apparently everyone is having problems with running the game. I've seen people posting with ridiculously high specs and saying they're having problems running at 1024x768.
Aside from these issues, the graphics are pretty crap anyway, even when I run it on 1280x1024 (it's a slideshow) the graphics are sub-standard. The textures are crap, objects are rectangular, the graphics are only slightly better than DX1. I don't know what the hell you guys were taking when you said it was a "smart looking game" with "slick graphics".
I also noticed that the game has been released on X-Box. Small areas separated by loading times - in fact the whole gameplay - reminds me of a console FPS (*You are utterly insane - Ed*). I agree with GamingIllustrated.com, "Deus Ex 2 actually is a dumbed down and simplified game constructed to better fit the ideals of the console market - simply put, they sold out."
I'm not saying your review was wrong, I'm just saying I'm quite disappointed with the game so far, and it seems to me 96% is grossly overrating it. Even with the best story in the world, 96% is a huge score. Anyways, tell me what you guys think, was it a good game or not? I think it was a poor effort for a four year wait.

Paul M

I thought we already told you what we think of Invisible War. "Impeccable game design… Still stands head and shoulders above the pack... 96%." Invisible War, and its merits relative to the original Deus Ex, has been the subject of agonising debate amongst PCPP staff and contributors since we published our review. While we're far from unanimous on the issue of which is the superior game, we firmly stand behind our review and score. Everything we liked about Deus Ex remains intact - or is improved upon - in the sequel. Of course, you may have enjoyed Deus Ex for different reasons - the skills system or bloody reloading or whatever - so we can also understand your disappointment in this regard. In terms of criticism of the game's performance, we're in "damned if we do, damned if we don't" territory there. We mentioned how resource intensive it is, but considering the diversity of PC setups, it's impossible to accurately factor this into a review and/or score. It hardly reflects poorly on a game's quality if it deliberately requires a high-end configuration.

ACADEMIC CIRCLES

I read with interest the posts from the forum in what I suppose would be two issues ago now, regarding computer games as texts, and whether they should be studied in schools. Coincidentally I'm in the middle of researching a thesis to cap off my Arts degree at the University of Sydney, and my topic is none other than computer games. Contrary to what the guys in the forums seemed to think, it isn't only narrative-based RPGs like the Final Fantasy games that get attention in academic circles. My thesis is about the recent

spate of WW2 games, both FPS and RTS, that have sprung up since the 50th anniversary of D-Day and the release of Saving Private Ryan, and how they represent the war and make people think and feel about it. I guess I'll be the first person ever to cite Call of Duty in an academic paper, and I know I'll be one of a very privileged few to have a 'gameography' as well as a bibliography and filmography. I guess I wanted to say to those posters from the forums, keep up your hope and interest; games already have a much more widespread respect amongst the normally stuffy and conservative university 'elite' than you'd think. Hell, one day you might even be able to study them in school, and better yet, at uni! The best bit of all this is that not only does this retroactively make the last five years of my life

'research', not merely screwing around on the computer, but it also makes my new Athlon 64 powerhouse of a gaming rig tax-deductible... heh heh heh.

Nick Irving

Insight

SIM ORIGIN

There have been several interesting announcements this month, starting with the fact that the makers of those lovely Sims games, Maxis, have relocated to EA headquarters. In further bringing-in-the-sheep news EA has closed its Austin Studio. In effect EA has closed Origin Systems, the makers of Ultima Online and Wing Commander. The people who want them have been offered jobs in California while those who don't are getting severance pay.

BACK TO NAM

What's worse, a WW2 shooter or a Vietnam shooter? We don't know, they all look the same. Here's another one. Pterodon has declared it's begun work on a follow-up to Vietcong, the nearly-there tactical shooter from mid last year. No details, no release dates, no references to war crimes, just a statement of intent. Thanks guys.

SLIPPING SOUTH

Oz Falls in Broadband Standing

Timothy C. Best

New figures by the Organization of Economic Co-operative Development have shown that Australia is slipping in the broadband race compared to the 29 other member nations.

We have fallen from number 18 to 20 behind the UK and Italy. Before you mention their populations, it's measured by penetration per 100 people. That's not to say that broadband hasn't been growing here, from 1.4 to 2.65 percent for the year between June 2002 and 2003 and we continue to have steady growth. Steady, but slow growth.

For the year beginning June 2001 we slipped from 13th to 16th position, so this is something of a trend.

To give you an idea of the high-end of broadband popularity, South Korea leads the way with 23.17 out of every 100 people being hooked up, followed by Canada at 13.27.

For a country that prides itself on having this great telecommunications system it's pretty average, especially since this is telecommunications that affects our gaming and it is probably the easiest way to connect rural areas to the rest of the world.

If you look at the market for massively multiplayer gaming in a place like South Korea you can see how much influence that gives them in gaming circles. More influence means more targeted games, earlier availability and a healthier development industry.

In related broadband news, Telstra has been busted for offering ADSL to its customers for a price that is cheaper than its wholesale rates, meaning that other ISPs would have to take a loss to compete. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission soon jumped all over that, so now some of Telstra's wholesale rates are a whopping 20c less than the basic Telstra ADSL account. While the price cuts are sure to be welcomed, you have to wonder about Telstra's attitude. Privatisation, bah.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY SPAM!

Worst invention ever turns 10 this year

Anthony Fordham

First it destroyed Usenet. Then it sank its insidious talons into email. Next, our chat clients such as ICQ and MSN were hit. Where next for spam? Look out mobile phone users (ie, everyone) because the worst invention in the history of human communication has you in its sites.

Most pundits agree that the rise of spam is like the rise of language itself - an inevitable result of the way humans think. Capitalism has given us many things, chief among them armies of unscrupulous geniuses who bend their mighty minds to thinking up even more insidious ways of making a quick buck.

The first spam message was posted to Usenet on March 5, 1994 by US law firm Canter and Siegel. The message advertised the Green Card lottery system that the US Department of Immigration runs to help lucky immigrants 'skip ahead' in the queue. The law firm posted thousands of messages to likewise thousands of groups, and once other companies saw how ill-equipped Usenet was to block or police this marketing technique, it was pretty much all over.

Nowadays, you'd be hard pressed to find a Usenet group with a regular readership that remains unaffected by spam. Usenet regulars have come up with ingeniously baroque ways of 'disguising' their email addresses, either by using replacement characters for things such as the @, or swapping parts of the address around and including an instruction for legitimate correspondents. This is because automated spam programs can extract email addresses from Usenet posts and spread the mayhem further.

Happy birthday spam. And here's to another decade of property foreclosures, erectile dysfunction and tiny remote controlled cars.

NVIDIA RAMS NEW RAM

Claims first production board featuring GDDR 3

Anthony Fordham

Now we know what the big garish sticker surrounded by lightning bolts on the next generation of video card boxes will read: POWERED BY GDDR 3! Expect promises of "cinematic quality graphics" and "the most intense and realistic gaming experience ever."

Graphics DDR 3 SDRAM is the new generation of ultra-fast RAM, designed specifically for video cards. It promises to run at 1.5 time the speed of GDDR 2 but consumes only half the power, thanks to lower voltages. GDDR 3 will run at 1.8V rather than 2.5V.

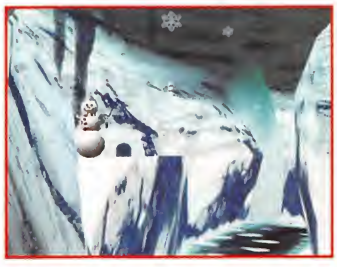
The total bandwidth of the new RAM will be as high as 6.4GB/s, thanks to a 1.6GB/s per pin data rate. Expect the RAM to run at speeds of 600MHz and 800MHz.

Nvidia has signed RAM industry giant Samsung to provide GDDR 3 for its new range of 128MB GeForce FX 5700 Ultra boards. Video cards using the new RAM should be reaching shelves as you read this.

Ironically enough, GDDR 3 was first developed by ATi, which we all know by now is Nvidia's arch-rival and perhaps eventual Nemesis. Unfortunately for ATi, Nvidia claims its boards are the first to actually reach the market.

Meanwhile, more than a few game developers, while appreciating the ever-growing abilities of graphics technologies, are beginning to wish other PC component manufacturers would take a leaf from the video card bible and improve bandwidths.

Compared to video cards, today's hard drives are positively arcane, slowly shuffling data around the machine at a snail's pace. Unless something is done, say developers, game load times are only going to get longer and longer as new video card technology allows developers to cram even more content into each scene.



IT'S THIS OR THE DOCTOR'S

Gaming to Ease the Pain

Timothy C. Best

A study at Seattle's Harborview Medical Center is showing that computer games and virtual worlds can be so distracting that they can edge out pain in people's minds.

Dr Hunter Hoffman has been testing the effects of his virtual worlds on burns victims who have to suffer through pain bandage changing every day.

He says that since pain has a large psychological component it needs conscious attention and people only have a limited amount of focus. Hence, if you immerse them in something else it gives them less processing power to work on the pain signals.

Hoffman's projects are hardly of the magnitude of Doom 3 but SnowWorld, for instance, places players in a world of glittering ice caves and glaciers where they have to fend off penguins and polar bears. What's even cooler is that they get to wear those big 3D headsets, because, I guess, the whole thing doesn't work so well if the nurse keeps turning you into penguin-chow by getting her head in the way.

I think the moral of the story is that now there's evidence that games help make the pain go away, next time you're having a rough time and your parents, boss or girlfriend bug you about playing too many computer games you can tell them, "it's either this, or irresponsible binge drinking," and let them decide.

SIM SIM CITY

Getting to the Thirteenth Floor

Timothy C. Best

Is it just me or is the whole "sim within a sim" thing just plain creepy? Well, creepy or not, that's what you get with a SimCity-inspired download for Electronic Art's mega-hit The Sims, called Slice City.

Once you have updated your game with the download you can place a Power Plant on your lot and then watch a tiny city grow. If you maintain the buildings, build roads and fork out for some attractions – as well as take care not to step on too many citizens – you'll see your creation prosper and grow. The happier the citizens and the more numerous they are, the more money they will generate and the more profit you will see from the city.

Yes, your Sims make money from the toil of their sims. Bad city operators will find the maintenance bills racking up and their little virtual people fleeing.

If you like the convenience of running a little town then you can power down your city to stop it expanding any more or, if you want to keep it growing, you can always hire a gardener to help you out.

The SimSlice city is set up almost on the scale of a living model and players can walk around and through it. It was coded by avid Sims fan Steve Alvey and you can pick it up at the www.simslice.com website.

MONKEY MAGIC

Shortly before the Sam & Max 2 story broke, we had heard a rumour circulating that suggested LucasArts was planning a new instalment of the Monkey Island series. However, given we've now seen two point-and-click revivals shelved (the other being the ill-fated Full Throttle 2), we think this is one rumour to take with a grain of salt.

BIGGER THAN WIGGLES

While on the topic of law-breaker games, World of Outlaws Sprint Cars has won developers Ratbag the Australian Interactive Media Industry award for best game, edging out serious competition from the Dataworks's The Wiggles: Wiggles Bay and ABC for Kids: Favourites.

LONGER JOURNEY

In brighter news for adventure fans (yes, all three of you), Funcom has decided to make a sequel to its acclaimed and really quite popular point-and-click of a few years ago, The Longest Journey. It will be titled Dreamfall and stars a new lead character (female, of course), though the original's protagonist, April Ryan, will also feature. Expect more news at E3.

NEW CONTRACT

Eidos has this month announced the purchase of Hitman developer IO Interactive. The Dnaish studio now join the ranks of Ion Storm and Crystal Dynamics as a wholly owned subsidiary of Eidos. IO's next game is Hitman: Contracts, due for release in June.

QUAKE 4

Rockstar has released details about the next GTA game, called Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. Though these details are restricted to a title, and the fact it should arrive on the PS2 for the Christmas season with a PC version following in 2005. Goodness knows what the theme of this one will be, because all San Andreas calls to mind is a particularly cranky fault line.

TRAP TWIST

Promising a "twist on the classic action-adventure game" comes Traps of Darkness from publisher Strategy First. In it, "gamers have the chance to play the role of evil and use their wits and skills to declare victory and eternal doom for mankind." That's right, victory *and* doom for mankind. Hmm. Apparently collecting keys will form part of the gameplay. Now there's a twist.

ADDING UP GAMES

You Know Games Have Made it When...

Timothy C. Best

It seems that big companies are finally starting to take note of just how persuasive games can be and how many people they touch.

One consultancy, the Hive Partners, is starting a push to broker more deals between companies looking for advertising and product placement and game developers who are looking for a little extra cash.

So far it has had two successes both with fizzy energy drink Red Bull and the people behind it. In Team 17's recent Worms 3D, players could suck on a Red Bull to recharge their health as well as giving their worm the ability to make bounding leaps – insert Red Bull gives you wings gag here. In Judge Dredd vs. Judge Death we see a level where the good Judge (loosely speaking) has to track down a gang importing illicit Red Bull. In the Dredd comics caffeine has been banned, you see, and nothing is beneath the notice of our masked lawman. In the game the gang even runs around tagging things with the distinctive Bull logo, which is just bound to piss Dredd off even more.

A recent Detroit News article talked about Mitsubishi North America getting so much pressure to bring in the Lancer Evo after Grand Turismo that it eventually crumbled. Now they sell 500 per month to young buyers who the head of marketing insists are all gamers.

There's little doubt that we're just going to see more of this and gamers, being the cynical bunch that we are, will punish developers who get carried away, but examples like the caffeine drink in that average Dredd game show that advertising can work with a theme and not kill it.

N-GAGE 2 DEFINITELY EXISTS!

John Romero appears out of nowhere to confirm new console

Anthony Fordham

Okay so this story may not immediately affect you as a PC gamer, especially if you've long ago decided that you'd rather be fed feet first through a threshing machine than own a handheld game console shaped like a techno-taco, but hey, it features John Romero!

Unfortunately, even though Romero is in this case the bearer of glad tidings for people who wanted an N-Gage but couldn't quite bring themselves to buy such a badly designed handheld, he doesn't really let on that much.

He claims the new console will address all the failings of the N-Gage. It will be easier to use as a phone, and it will be much easier to change games on the fly. The user will still have to pop off the back cover of the unit, but won't have to actually remove the battery.

Romero also claims to have seen the new console, and says it's much thinner than the original.

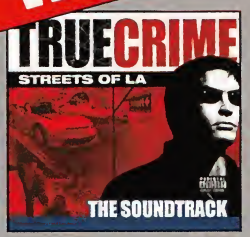
Speculators believe Romero is being wooed by Nokia to develop titles for their struggling gaming arm, presumably because the phone giant still thinks Romero is a famous developer. Romero's company Monkeystone currently develops Java games for standard mobile phones.

However, this wouldn't be a proper John Romero story if we didn't harp on about how coy interviews about N-Gage 2 are a far cry (reviewed this issue - Ed) from his Ion Storm days when he was lord and master of an entire skyscraper made of Nerf balls.

Romero also faked his own death at one point, appearing in photographs on a coroner's slab with a bullet hole in his head. Very few people reacted much.

Also, Romero and Killcreek split up some years ago. He's now married to a Russian teen. No, really.

WIN!



Crime does pay
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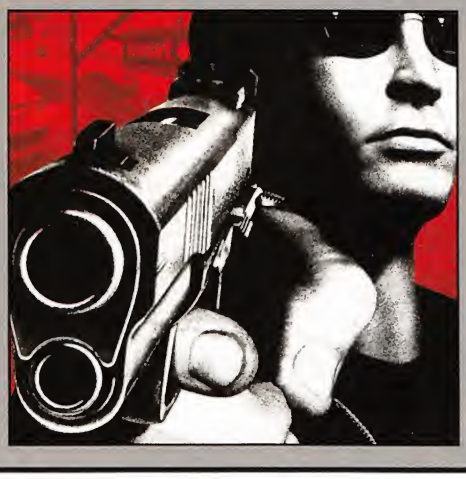
CRIME DOES PAY

The streets of LA aren't a nice place to be, as the PCPP staff discover every time we visit this skanky city to attend E3. You too can have recurring nightmares about smelly hobos, mysterious black cruisers and more concrete than a Mafia shoe store in the hit Activision title, True Crime: Streets of L.A.

We've got three True Crime prize packs to give away, each containing a copy of the game as well as a CD of the pumping soundtrack. To win you simply need to answer the following question on the back of an envelope, and send it in to the address below:

Q. Name the gang that is known as the biggest rival to the Bloods?



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Images by Mark Douglas, QANTM graduate now working at Krome Studios, Brisbane

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CARTOON COMBAT

Breed developer, Brat Designs, has announced a new project entitled Toon Army. The punningly named game appears to conform to the real-time strategy template in all aspects save for its visual aesthetic which adopts a cel-shaded style. It's a brave move, since comedy RTS (Red Alert aside) rarely fares well at retail.

COASTERS IN SPACE?

There is to be another Rollercoaster Tycoon game, it's official. According to publisher Atari, the third in the venerable series is to be developed by Frontier in the UK with assistance from Tycoon pioneer Chris Sawyer. Frontier, as you may know, is headed by David Braben, who, as you may also know, formed half the team that created space trading classic Elite.

HOMELAND SECURITY: THE GAME

As if American Army Wasn't Enough

Timothy C. Best

I always feel kind of bad for the US Army National Guard. It doesn't get all the glory, in fact it gets to be the group that enforces martial law, cracks down on rioters and helps with things like fire and earthquake emergencies. In short, it gets a host of important but unpleasant jobs.

Well to bring a bit of glamour to the great institution of civilians serving their country part-time, the National Guards has followed in the footsteps of the American Army and will release a game as a recruiting tool.

The game based on homeland defence is called PRISM: Black Shield and it is meant to entertain while increasing awareness of the Guard.

Since Rival Interactive would have a bit of trouble making a straight-up National Guard game, it's developing a title set six years in the future where a secret section of our favourite armed force is fighting terrorists on US soil. Players will have access to doodads like active camouflage, robotic cameras and computer-guided assault weapons to help them through levels of FPS action.

Players will be able to play individually or in cooperatively against AI controlled terrorists.

Not only does this whole thing show that the American Army game was successful enough as a recruiting tool to be copied but it also points to a whole new world of advertising abusing the selling the sizzle mantra. It almost seems like they are trying to say, "Join the Guard and – in six years – we'll be waaaaaay cooler than the army." Weird.

I must say, however, that I'm kind of looking forward to the Republican Party recruitment game. Hmmm … computer guided weapons …

BE THE ULTIMATE DUEL MASTER!

10 Prize packs up for grabs!

WIN!

Duel Masters is one of the hottest trading card games to come out of Japan in the last few years. This is dueling action at its finest - battles are fast and intense, and take place in a mysterious dimension called The Zone. Be the first to battle through your opponent's card defenses and strike the final winning blow! Better still, the Duel Masters cards come loaded stylish art and plenty of character. We like.

To celebrate the release of Duel Masters at all good Card and Hobby shops across Australia, 10 Lucky readers have the chance to win a fantastic Duel Masters prize pack courtesy of our friends at Wizards of the Coast. Each prize pack contains a Duel Masters Base Set Starter Pack and 3 Booster Packs worth over $40!

To be in with a chance to win one of the ten packs, just answer the following question:

Q. Name another card series that comes from Wizards of the Coast?

Put your answer on the back of an envelope along with your name and address, and post it to:

Duel this, biatch!
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FOOTIE WINS FUNDAGE

IR Gurus get Gov Cash Injection

Timothy C. Best

If you needed any more proof that Australia loves its sports then look no further than the nature of the first computer game to get cash flow support from a State Government Agency.

The Film Victorian is injecting 1.5 million dollars into IR Gurus to help it develop AFL Live Premiership Edition and AFL 2005 for Acclaim. Last I checked, footie games weren't films, but what do I know?

The games will be the follow-ups to two previous titles and more than 700,000 Aussie rules games have been sold in Australia since 1995 so domestically, at least, the games are a pretty good bet.

Internationally, it might be a different story, but more than 5,000 units of AFL 2003 on the PS2 were sold in the UK so at least we know that we are exporting some culture. Sure, most of those copies would have gone to Aussies working abroad but surely some poms would have been roped into playing as well.

You'd think that the Government would target games with a broader market appeal for export purposes, especially since the big game markets are USA, Asia and Europe, but then again I guess we've got plenty of gridiron and ice hockey games so now it's our turn to return the favour.

Beyond furthering our cultural imperialism, the two new games are expected to create 25 new jobs. Hopefully, this is a sign of things to come and games will start to see the same level of grants as Aussie films. Having an organisation like Film Victoria up to speed can only help that along.

PC PENGUINPLAY

Linux in Translation

Timothy C. Best

It's not much of a secret that if you want to play games on your PC you really want to be using some version of Windows (preferably not ME). Linux gamers haven't really got much of a look in unless you count being able to run game servers. Hopefully, a little program called WineX will help change all of that.

The software, being developed by TransGaming Technologies, is designed to translate Windows games so that they run on Linux. Users should be able to pull the Windows game out of the box and be ready to go.

The current version of WineX supports such games as Dark Age of Camelot and even Valve's Steam update system for the likes of Half-Life, CS and Day of Defeat.

The company's chief technology officer, Gavriel State, says that running the Windows games via WineX doesn't impact performance and TransGaming has actually got some games to work faster using their software.

A move like this makes perfect sense, because while some games like Unreal and Bioware's NeverWinter Nights have come out for Linux, there just aren't enough Linux games buyers to really make ports cost effective.

Should hard-core geeks, who'd rather not dice with Microsoft, miss out on gaming goodness? I think not! Beyond that, even if the WineX doesn't quite work as it should, if you're running Linux you'll probably have a good idea how to help fix it.

INNOVISION COMPETITION

If you're looking to cause permanent hearing damage, aggravate your quiet neighbours or scare the hell out of your pets, a good set of PC speakers should do the trick. Altec Lansing is a brand synonymous with high quality speakers, so we were more than happy to give away three sets from its new range. To prolong the Altec Lansing lovin' we'll be spreading the comp over three months, and to kick it off we're giving away a set of the new 4121s - with bass that goes boom and two ultra slick slimline satellites, you'll be rocking away into the wee hours. Props to Innovision (www.innovision.com.au) for supplying these speakers. To enter the comp, simply answer the following question on the back of an envelope and post your entry to the address below:

Q. What RMS are these speakers rated at?

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Developer Diary

S.T.A.L.K.E.R Shadow of Chernobyl

Developer Diary #2
Tentative steps inside the Zone...

The storyline and concept behind S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is now well known: we have taken the semi-factual accounts surrounding the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986 and examined the many conspiracy theories that accompany this. For those that are not aware, the final two decades of the last millennium were subject to the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine. The fallout of this was the one of the largest industrial and ecological disasters in history. Being just 100 kilometres away from the tragedy meant that our team witnessed the consequences of this accident first hand. The idea of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. arose from the idea of a neglected exclusion zone, a man-made hell where survival is everything.

The game posits a second accident in Chernobyl (dated April 12, 2006) that leads to the establishment of a contaminated area abundant in anomalies and hostile mutant creatures. The game serves as a stark warning of the potential dangers of such power. With this in mind we worked hard to produce a believable environment that represented the horror of such a location. A vast sense of emptiness hangs above our scorched earth with its poisonous fogs, deadly anomalies, psychotropic impacts and an ecology that can only deliver hunger into the bellies of those willing to operate within its borders. The Zone is not somewhere that welcomes humanity.

Accuracy was our key goal in creating S.T.A.L.K.E.R. The world of the Zone represents a highly detailed reconstruction of Chernobyl and its surroundings. Over 30 square kilometres were authentically reproduced from extensive photographic and video surveys. 60% of what you will see in the game is physically faithful in virtually every detail. The concrete power plant tower, deserted street layouts, sulky multi-storey buildings from the Soviet era, smashed shop windows, dilapidated garages and upturned telephone booths are all present and correct in this 3D image of a 'dead city'. Even the interior of the power plant sarcophagus was recreated and will be accessible in the game. Detail, for us, was everything if we were to succeed in establishing a believable game environment.

The locations and levels of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. form one global map where the player is free to roam without any directional limits. This freedom extends into the cities of Prypjat and Chernobyl, deep into surface and underground laboratory complexes and into the vast territory of neglected military bases and testing grounds that litter the Zone. It's a huge undertaking for a developer to create such freedom and complexity but we have worked hard to ensure that every part of the Zone is interesting, original or faithful in terms of architecture. The look of old structures from the 1960's (known across the ex-USSR as "khushevkas") encompass much of the ruins of central city square with its iconographic monument to Lenin and the surrounding communist buildings. It is a style that helps capture a sort of dead beauty and an area caught in time before the world changed. The atmosphere can be seen, felt and heard throughout the Zone as it entices the player to explore every corner and experience the many mortal dangers posed by its inhabitants.

This sense of realism finds its way into the landscape detail. An advanced graphics engine creates and controls densely detailed environments where grass and trees react to gusts of wind and shadows and lighting fill the game with a truly dynamic edge. Our X-Ray technology engine includes support not only of restrictive indoor spaces but of vast open spaces too. We have created a single world where a huge number of polygons per frame are shifted about the screen and motion capture animation sets up a believable experience. Add to this the natural passage of night and day and you get a technology that reveals the full glory of radioactive red forests and marshlands alive with creatures and mysterious plant life amongst many other startling sights including a wide range of 'monsters'.

This brood of contaminated mutations have their own natural (or unnatural) behaviours to follow. Some frequent specific areas while others can be found anywhere on the map as they pursue endless hidden or inexplicable goals. No stalker should be surprised to see wastelands and dumps turned into a living mass of blind dogs whose sixth sense allows them to sense the approach of an enemy - even from behind walls. Dwarves too populate the landscape, though these are a species whose poor eyesight confines them (usually) to dimly lit dungeons. Every stalker or scientist is susceptible to ambush from these creatures. The common plague of abandoned cities is the rat and S.T.A.L.K.E.R. possesses them in the thousands as they pour from every deserted house or building. When attacking, most mutated creatures will look for the advantage afforded by every type of hideout or nook. Surprise is part of everyday life in the Zone and there is no way of knowing what will attack and from where. The S.T.A.L.K.E.R. life simulation system puts more than flesh on these inhabitants: it controls their every move and breathes genuine behavioural personality into their frames.

During the construction of the Zone we had to pay special attention to environmental interactivity. This means that many of the objects in the game, which you'd expect to be destructible, are. The physics involved heighten player immersion in much the same way as the architecture, the night/day cycles, the character scripting and every other adherence to detail included in the game. Object manipulation is yet another level of this philosophy as even creatures are endowed with the ability to affect their environment - within the limitations of their natural IQ. Certain groups of mutants will be able to interact from a distance provided they possess telekinetic abilities. Don't be surprised to see bricks, chairs and even tables hurtling towards you.

In short, the devil is in the detail and S.T.A.L.K.E.R. has more than its fair share of devils roaming through the Zone. Our team has managed to preserve a high degree of realism whilst also enhancing this reality for the needs of the game world. This unique blend of approaches will, undeniably, increase the playability of the game.

Alexei Sytyanov, Game Designer

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HOTWARE

All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham

KALEIDESCAPE SYSTEM

Price: $43,500 **Distributor:** Kaleidescape **Contact:** www.kaleidescape.com

As I was idly flipping through my many offshore banking accounts the other day, I suddenly realised I had $100,000 that I really needed to get spent in order to write it off on my huge and unwieldy quarterly tax assessment. So I hopped into a First Class Qantas Club seat and flew to the US where I picked up the Kaleidescape System.

Quite simply, this thing is an expandable movie server that rips DVDs and then pipes the movie to any Kaleidescape player in your home. So I grabbed a half-dozen players and the full compliment of expandable storage for the server.

The total space came to a very impressive 3 terabytes, which is enough storage to make even the grand old days of Napster seem small-fry. The server communicates with the players using standard CAT5 cabling, so I was even able to use the spare wireless access points I had scattered through my eighteen room mansion at Palm Beach.

The system uses its own menu system to allow you to sort movies much like music in an MP3 player, and now that I have all of this stuff I never need buy a DVD again! I can just pirate them off my mates!

SOLSUNO WATCH

Price: $250 **Distributor:** Think Geek **Contact:** www.thinkgeek.com

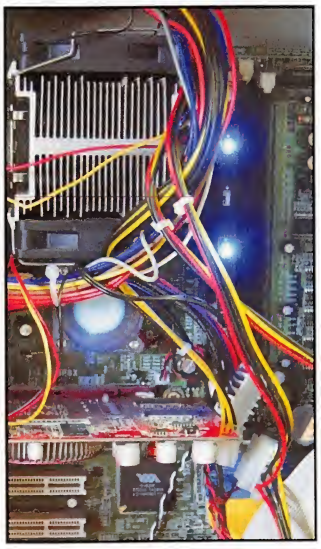
What have we constantly and unfailingly asserted in the pages of Hotware? That LEDs are good. In fact, studies show that LEDs can be statistically linked to better sexual performance and enhanced mental acuity. Maybe.

Anyway, this here watch harnesses the power of the LED to tell time. Rather than dull workaday hands or LCD display, the Solsuno watch instead uses LED technology to position little dots of light all over the face of the watch in such a way that you are able to tell what time it is. Ingenious!

There are no fewer than 138 LEDs built into this watch, which is enough to stiffen the mainsail of even the most lacklustre digital buccaneer. With a deft press of a single button, you can command the LEDs to stay on for 15 consecutive seconds. Wow!

RAM MOD LIGHTING KIT

Price: $22 **Distributor:** PC Range **Contact:** www.pcrange.com.au



Thank God PC Range is offering this awesome little accessory because I was starting to get shrill and desperate as I ran out of things in my case to light up. I've got the cold cathode tubes, the flexible EL cable, the light-up IDE cables, the light-up fans, the laser LEDs, the shimmering, pulsating CPU heatsink fan, even my PSU puts out UV to make my strips of reflective tape on the power leads light up. But no matter how much stuff I chucked in the back of the PC, one sector remained cold and dark and unloved. Until now, because thanks to PC Range, at last my RAM can step into the light and get the recognition it so richly deserves. I mean really, we light up boring IDE cables, but until now our precious RAM has been ignored.

The RAM Mode Lighting Kit (it is what it says it is, and I for one admire its forthrightness) is basically a row of LEDs that you can strap to your RAM. A handy little IC with a button attached lets you cycle through a massive eight lighting modes. Please note, red and blue versions only cost $19.95, while the superior green version goes for $21.95.

Now I just need a light for my CMOS battery...

MOUSESKATEZ

Price: $15 **Distributor:** PC Case Gear **Contact:** www.pccasegear.com.au

Fifteen bucks doesn't buy you a great deal of computer hardware these days. In fact, it never has. Or that's what I thought until these technologically advanced, user friendly, friction limiters arrived. Yes, they do look just like two bits of tape, but don't let that deceive you.

They're actually two strips of a rare material known as Stickerium Slipperenius. Their job is to stick to the bottom of your mouse and make it more slippery than ever before. Talk about high tech. The packs states that there is enough of this wonder material to do your mouse twice over, but with the aid of a slide rule, protractor and spirit level you should be able to double this.

For a mere $15 this is probably the most cost effective upgrade you can make to your PC. The difference between a mouse with skatez and without is like night and day - you simply haven't moused before until you've used this magical blue tape. You'll need to change it every 6 weeks or so as it wears out over time, but it's worth the trouble. For once this is a Hotware item that you really do need.

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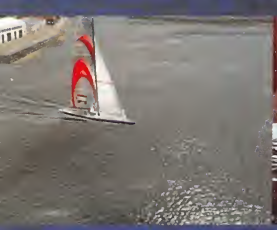

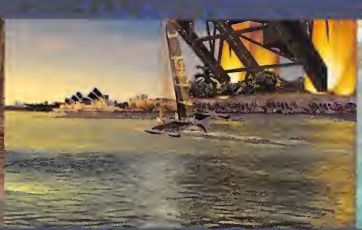

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OUT TO PLAY Timothy C. Best

Physical Control

(or Dance Monkey, Dance)

After writing the news on the exercise equipment disguised as game contsrollers, last issue, I was willing to let it pass until I got caught – waving my arms like I was trying not to face-first into a swimming pool – in front of an Eye-toy.

Who would have thought that Sony's jumped-up webcam could incite jaded players to callisthenics? Up until that point I was looking at exercise-machine gaming as some sort of sick joke. Sure, something like a hook-up to street racing game could make a routine of 40km on a stationary bike more interesting than just staring at the wall of a gym, but really, wouldn't you be better off actually riding somewhere?

The other game controller, the kiloWatt seemed even stranger: a big pole that you really had to push on really hard to get a response. Apparently the strain is enough to give you a good upper body workout.

Working out is one thing, playing games is another and bringing them together is a recipe for some really pissed off kids with well-meaning parents. Did you read about that kid in Scotland who got that disease made famous by long flights – deep vein thrombosis – from sitting on his immobile rear playing computer games for 10 hour stretches? Everyone knows you put your fridge with Jolt cola out of arm's reach so you have to get up from time to time, sheesh! Blame him when your alarmist parents come home with the USB exercise bike.

Evil Eye

In the face of all of this gamercise cynicism, the Eye-toy mesmerised me with its Cyclops stare and, like I said, it not only had me doing aerobics but it had me liking it. Reacting, not just with your thumbs, but with expressive movement offered not just exercise but also new ways to experience games.

There was one Kung Fu game that I really dug. Dozens of little mooks charge you – like you're standing between them and three Swords of Destiny and the honour of their ancestors – and you get to bat them away with your hands as they appear on screen. Soon you realise that some of the guys are more fun to hit with elbows and then even head butts. Sure, you look like a fool, but you're a Kung Fool.

Since the Eye-toy just reads motion you can even throw the odd kick in. On the most basic level this is just cool because it lets you dream that a Holodeck (complete with Jerri Ryan) must be just round the corner, but it also shakes up how we play games and the limitations that we've just come to accept.

For example, in the kung fu game guys pile out from both sides and you notice yourself picking them off one by one, like you would with an FPS target, but you soon come to realise that you're being a dope. You have two arms. You can attack one up … hold it a second … sweep down and catch three more guys in the reverse motion and then strike out with your off hand. In the end I think I was practicing some reject form of flailing that would have earnt me about a million push-ups if practiced in any reputably dojo around the world – using double moves and combined sweeping block attacks that not even Jackie Chan would make a movie about.

This is something that all of the Oni, Action Quake or Counter-Strike in the world won't teach you since mouse and key board is all about prioritising and having to move the target between each enemy one at a time. Gameplay limitations like that are so basic we barely even see them anymore.

The other standout thing about a physical dimension to games, beyond opening new doors, is that it adds another layer of immersion. When your motions reflect what's going on in the game, of course it's going to give you a deeper connection to it, which is something that people with force-feedback steering wheels have known for years. In the Kung Fu game it's tough not to bob, weave, pull faces and make dragon claw actions … even between levels. Of course this makes it hilarious for your friends to watch, which is an obvious bonus, well, for them at least.

Getting Physical

This all makes me want to re-think my gimmick tag for something like the kiloWatt. Since you can set the resistance, it doesn't have to rapidly destroy your ability to raise your arms high enough to scratch your head, like that first trip to the gym, it could actually offer you new options. Imagine the level of control you could get out of this above and beyond what you can get with an analogue D-pad or thumbstick. For one, the rod is much larger, and secondly, it gives you increasing resistance. I'm picturing how much fun it could be nudging a car around a tight corner using your whole body, almost picturing the steering rod as the car you're begging to turn. I'm thinking about being able being able to yank back to leap out of the line of fire or shove forward into the breach.

Soon you realise that some of the guys are more fun to hit with elbows and head butts

Beyond all of that, I know that there are times, especially when I'm having to review some very well-executed trip into aggravation, that I've wanted to get physical with a controller, and not in a good Oliver-Newton-John kind of way. Something like this could be perfect for working off excess game frustration.

Feel the Burn

Not every game would be suitable for this kind of thing and lord knows that there are times you just want to collapse somewhere and work on your deep vein thrombosis.

Beyond the drawback of demanding motion when you want to be a potato, there are other obvious issues like trying to enact multiplayer Eye-toy games. Imagine how often players would smack each other up-side the head trying to fit in front of the TV. Then there's the fact that Eye-toy games only work if the character doesn't have to walk anywhere in the game (what are you going to do, wander off into the other room?), but if you combined something like this with the Dance Dance Revolution mat then you could move your character by stepping on squares on a mat marked forwards, back, left and right and still keep your arms free.

In a Harvey Norman's catalogue I just saw a webcam that pivots to follow your face, and the Eye-toy, which is several steps behind that kind of recognition, has not only sold a heap of units, but has been so impressive that Sega is installing Sony's toy in its arcades all across Japan. What's more, future generations of PlayStation are all aiming to including devices like this to read player actions as standard. Something like this combines the feel of running around your back yard pretending to be G-Force and the impact of 3D graphics.

Just accept it. Soon we are all going to have bodies like Richard Simmons and we'll have computer games to thank for it…

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TECH TALK: Stuart Calvin

The next generation

A generation, loosely defined, is a group of people who can be demographically identified by biological and social trends, and have shared experiences. Whether these constructs add up to distinct generational world views that are relevant to us, is not fully determined but it provides a useful platform from which to think about technology. In this light, does anyone realise that Generation X is about to start turning 30? If you were born after 1964 then you're Gen X and most likely the offspring of a Baby Boomer. If you were born from 1980 onwards you're a Y Generation baby. The Baby Boomers are about to turn 60 and have been retiring from the full-time workforce since the turn of the century and will continue to do so despite what Peter Costello claims. The defining characteristics of the Y Generation are clear. Its tremendous buying power and, despite an astounding degree of media savviness, an almost cheerfully compliant consumerism and buoyant malleability at the hands of shrewd marketeers and lifestyle firms. When you think about it, the only thing propping up clothing, shoe and makeup sales in Australia are the teenage and early-twenty something age groups. I have teenagers, I can honestly vouch for this.

On the other hand, Gen X are a significant proportion of the workforce (i.e. they have money) ranging in age from mid-20s to late-30s. Interestingly, a wide sampling of surveys indicates that Gen X are less politically or civically engaged, exhibit less social trust or confidence in government, have a weaker allegiance to their country or to either major political party and are more materialistic than their predecessors. They have little trust in traditional institutions and dislike corporate rhetoric. Yep, I can relate to that even though I'm not Gen X. For me, the description "Traditionalist" sums them up.

For the life of me, I can't ever recall being formally asked if I'm a gamer, play on a LAN or even play on-line. Truth is, if the marketeers and life-style firms don't know who gamers are, how the hell do we know who we are? We can take a guess at some of the defining characteristics of a gamer. We typically spend too much money on hardware or put up with old hardware for too long. We've been eating rice and mince on toast for months now so we can buy Doom 3 and Half-Life 2. We'll continue to eat shit-on-a-shingle, to afford that next 'great game' until we die of old age, The Sims cure world famine, or Berri Berri, scurvy and rickets from the toast-only diet kills us. The next most important characteristic of a gamer's life is the "1 Megabit connection". People aspiring to the "1 Megabit Club" skimp on the mince and toast, hoping that the rice keeps them alive until their exchange is 'modified' by Telstra and ADSL prices tumble to something reasonable.

Given this speculation, I think we need to ask Australia about gaming. If we put as many resources into gaming as we put into the parliamentarians' postage allowance it would be compulsory to play games, titles would cost two bucks and broadband would be free. Unfortunately, the time to put forward suggestions to the ABS for new Census questions has passed. I think that was a Traditionalist conspiracy. Anyway, straight after "Date of Birth" on page 2 of the census form, I'd like to see the question "Do you game? Please indicate a response below:"

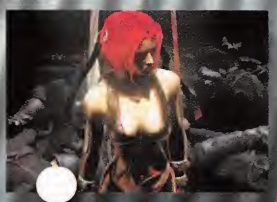
- If you don't understand the question please return your computer to its point of sale. You have no right to vote.
- 2D gamers tick here and go to Q3.
- 3D gamers tick here and complete the back two pages of questions.

What d'you think? Good, huh! That'll sort things out. That'll tell us who's worth saving when the next meteorite threatens the world.

My problem with Australia is that the Traditionalists are in charge. The over-60 year olds are, generally speaking, the CEOs and managing directors of big business. On the whole, they are the movers and shakers in politics, government and the various opposition parties to government. "Ziggy's a CEO and he's not 60!", I hear you say, but look at the facts and realise that he's not in charge of Telstra - the government Traditionalists are. Sure there are some smart people in charge but they're not focused on technology. The problem with Traditionalists is that they're either rich or they're not, they're focused on personal wealth and not technology. They are responsible for the big welfare and health bills in Australia today,and our national health bill is rising by 4% a year. The Baby Boomers, those aged about 30-60, don't care because they have increasing amounts of superannuation, the stocks and bonds have been great over time and they have 80% of the country's liquid wealth anyway. If these people want to play 3D titles they can buy six and the AMD FX53 to go with them. They will retire into financial independence and watch, with some amusement, the X and Y Generations work out how they're gonna pay crippling taxes, in 15-20 years time. As the rates of national welfare and health costs continue to increase there will be inevitable pressure on the rest of the federal budget. This has flow-on effects for every Australian. Curiously, the Y Generation will never know unemployment or will only have to deal with it briefly. If the technology sector can't keep up with wage pressures in the next 10-15 years and government investment falls off substantially in this sector, none of us can ever hope to see a seamless and integrated national communications infrastructure.

There are some smart people in charge but they're not focused on technology

Thankfully, some of the Gen X'rs in their 30s are already CEOs and MDs. They will be our leaders out to possibly 2050 but whomever the government and business leaders are over the next ten to fifteen years, they will be supported by the Dot.coms, a mix of X/Y Generations, who were born from 1976 to 1991. From early teenage years, the Dot.coms were exposed to information technology. They want interesting work that teaches them new skills and in the absence of new jobs, new training, new projects or tasks, they will be lost to other industrial sectors. Many Dot.coms will seek career changes around the age of thirty. So now's the time to catch this important generation for the information, communication and technology sector. While the Traditionalists ponder the ageing problem, it's the Dot.com generation that will design and implement the technology to save their own bacon in 2020. Let's just hope they like playing games.



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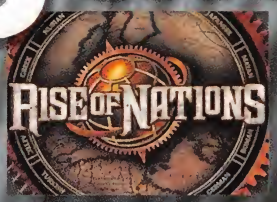

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THE GUERILLA GAMER

A Priori Priorities

So, what do you look for in a game? I mean really? Why do you play? What, for you, makes the difference between merely a good game, and a classic that will dominate your waking life for weeks at a time?

I ask because the response to our review of Deus Ex: Invisible War has been in equal parts aggravating, exasperating and baffling. Basically, the great unwashed think there's no way in hell the game should have got 96%.

Of course we always knew any score we gave the game and any comment we made about it would be met with derision, unless that comment was "Warren Spector sucks because IW is an Xbox sellout with dumbed-down console-style gameplay."

Nevertheless, we disagreed with the Interweb's mad ranting about the game on the basis that Invisible War was actually a great game, and things like a lack of weapon reloading didn't, to us, make that much of an impact on gameplay.

The mob disagreed. Specifically, the mob who had already played or otherwise decided that Invisible War was the worst game to ever claim to not be the worst game since Daikatana disagreed. Strongly. They pointed to a set of very specific indices by which they judged Invisible War so wanting that it should have received not 96, but rather 76. They argued until they were blue in the face, but like the arrogant despots we are we refused to back down.

So now the spot fires have died out and I've stopped bothering to read the many and varied threads on our forums about how we should all be fired and/or shot through the lungs for daring to like Invisible War, I'd like to stop and ask what, for you, is important in a game?

I was surprised that so many people thought so many little things were so important. Muzzle recoil. Wobbly targeting reticules when looking through a scope. Being able to search bodies instead of having their inventory spill onto the ground. High resolution textures. An abstract skill points system. Reloading. Different kinds of ammo for different kinds of weapons, instead of a sci-fi nano-assembler 'universal ammo' system. Et boring cetera.

Personally, I had no idea that all this minute crap was so important to people. I thought, naively enough, that if a game had decent graphics and showed you a thing or two you hadn't seen before it was pretty damn good. I didn't realise that an attempt to handle ammo differently from EVERY SINGLE shooter before it - an attempt that works - or leaving out muzzle recoil should preclude a game from getting a decent score, even if the rest of it is totally top notch.

In fact, some people believe Invisible War shouldn't get a good score simply because it has been developed concurrently for Xbox. They trawl through ini files and other arcana looking for Xbox references and every time they see one they shout "Eureka! Dock the thing another five points!" They, in short, think the game sucks because the interface is circular.

I'm sorry, but this level of nit-picking doesn't constitute real or meaningful criticism in my book. Sure, you can tote up a list of five hundred niggly little things you don't like about the game, but they're all still just niggles. Grouping them together doesn't create a mega-niggle that somehow equals a real point of contention. I'm pretty confident in saying that this magazine is unlikely to ever print: "I docked this game ten points because it didn't have muzzle recoil, plus I noted it also came out on Xbox." Unless of course, muzzle recoil is somehow integral to gameplay, as in a game that touts itself as the ultimate modern firearms simulator. Which Invisible War doesn't.

However, far be it for me to dare to cast aspersions on what's important to an at least very vocal minority of PC gamers. I guess, when I sit back and take one of the chill pills the doc prescribed me, there's no empirical reason why the criticisms levelled at Invisible War are necessarily invalid (or as I like to put it, batshit insane).

But are muzzle recoils and reloading really what's important to us as gamers? Do these minor points really have an impact on whether or not we are able to enjoy a game? Aren't we more interested in good level design, interesting and varied player tasks, and a game that generates an authentic sense of place?

Are we so inured to the repetitive design of the major genres that the only way we can distinguish between two games is if game x includes items on an arbitrary list of technical doohickies, such as ragdoll physics and realtime shadows? Is PCPP doomed to an endless stream of email complaining that we didn't dock World War 2 Shooter Mission 3D five points for only having four damage-location points on each NPC model?

What I took from the whole Invisible War review debacle was that some PC gamers seem surely to have lost their way. Come back to the fold guys. Forget about bullet trajectories and ricochet modelling. Don't scream about high-res textures and location damage. These are all cosmetics. There are more important aspects to our games, such as stories that don't sound like they've been written by spotty Timmy Clarke in Year 11 English. Such as gameplay that actually stretches us intellectually, and tests of skill that actually are tests of skill, not just tests of whether or not you can click your mouse button at exactly the right moment.

Am I beating a dead horse here? You tell me. But don't think we're not prepared for your reaction to our review of Doom 3. Expect us to mark it down heavily for just being another shooter where you run along corridors pointing a gun at everything that moves. But hey, the graphics will be great. I bet those muzzles recoil all over the place. I bet you have to press the reload button every ten seconds! And I bet the textures are really, really high-res.

The Guerrilla Gamer is a somewhat experienced PC gaming journalist who burnt his last bridge many years ago. He fully expects that his ageing Kombi will be firebombed as either a direct result of this article or as a direct result of what he said to the Rowville Under 17s Women's Rugby team in January. His views rarely coincide with anyone else's, let alone PCPP's.

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GAMES IN PREVIEW

What defines a shooter? I'd venture it's a game mechanic based primarily on the acquisition and elimination of hostile targets. The player's perspective is irrelevant – a shooter can be first-person, third-person, on-rails, top-down or side-scrolling.

What defines a good shooter? It's not the number of weapons or their subjective cool factor. It's not the 64 player online support. It's not the drivable vehicles. It's not the hi-res textures, pixel shading or dynamic lighting. It's not the 30 square kilometre maps. It's not the muzzle recoil or hitting the reload key. It's not the... you get the picture.

What makes a good shooter is the interest inherent in the acquisition and elimination of hostile targets. It's in the tangible strengths and weaknesses of each weapon type. It's in the meaningful variations in enemy behaviour and consequent tactical considerations. It's in carefully weighed risk/reward situations. It's in the choice and economics of the battlefield. It's about pitting your wits against a foe and simply surviving the encounter.

Everything else is a distraction and too many distractions can dilute the experience. Searching for keys is a distraction; smashing crates is a distraction; planting explosives is (usually) a distraction; indeed, any objective that doesn't conform to the primary gameplay mechanic can be a distraction.

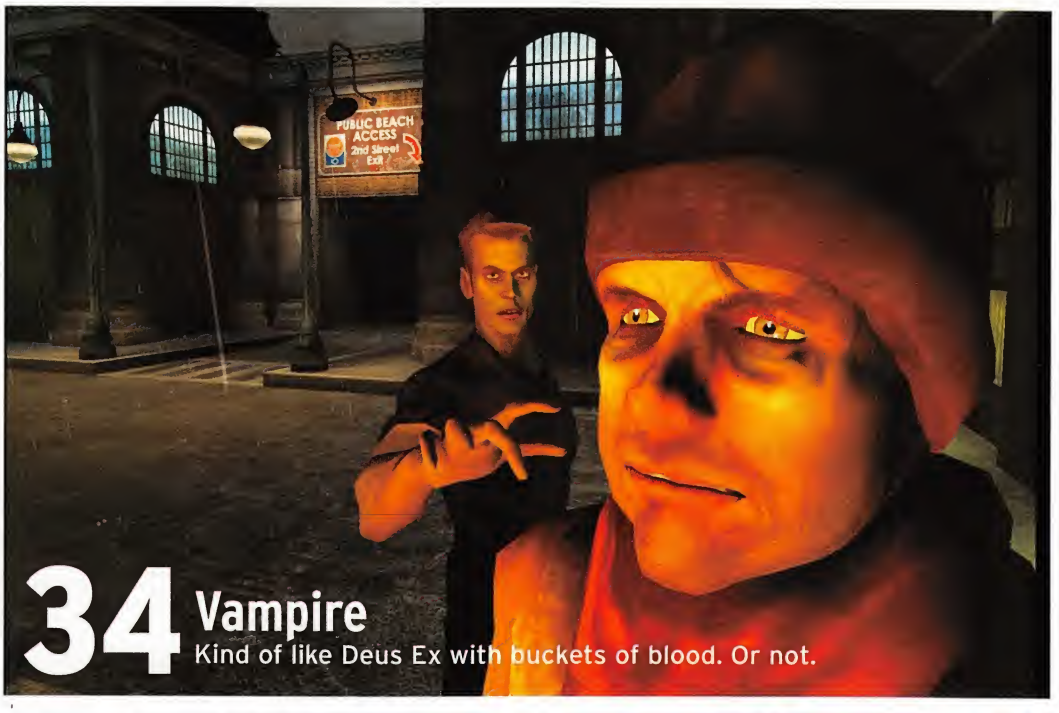
Half-Life remains a salutary lesson is shooter design. Distractions are minimised; your objective is clear – keep moving and survive. Its most memorable moments revolve around seat-of-the-pants victories in varied firefights.

Halo is another sterling example, if you ignore the performance issues with the PC conversion. It is pure combat. Environments may repeat, but the shoot-outs within them are unpredictable and always challenging.

In both games the developer's aim is always on the mechanic of shooting. While other teams attempt to further their game by adding distractions, both Valve and Bungie succeed by ensuring the shooting remains interesting, varied, thrilling and challenging from beginning to end.

So which shooter are you looking forward to?

David Wildgoose, Editor



34 Vampire
Kind of like Deus Ex with buckets of blood. Or not.

29 Thief: Deadly Shadows
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34 Vampire

Thief: Deadly Shadows

Garrett's back... is visible in most of these screenshots thanks to a new third-person view

The third in the acclaimed Thief series continues the story of Garrett, the master thief, and the City, a post-industrial, pre-enlightenment network of twisted cobblestone alleys and grand gothic cathedrals where it's night 24/7. Despite the closure of original developer Looking Glass a few years ago, Thief was always meant to be a tale told in three parts. Fortunately Eidos passed responsibility to Ion Storm and the trilogy can be completed.

One of the many reasons Thief is so adored by its hardcore fans is that its free-form stealth-based mechanics forged a new style of game – almost a new genre in itself – that has yet to even be copied let alone surpassed. The likes of Splinter Cell and Metal Gear Solid were mostly linear puzzle games dressed in stealth clothing; their gadget-based solutions typically lacked the elegance and simplicity of Thief – you can, for instance, complete both Thief games by sneaking all the way without recourse to weapons or tools.

In keeping with the spirit of the previous games, this is very much a minimalist affair. Garrett is a fairly regular guy, albeit one exceptionally skilled at being quiet, and thus his best chance of survival when venturing where he shouldn't be is to sneak. The majority of your time will be spent monitoring guard positions and patrol routes while eliminating resistance as silently as possible and letting the darkness cover your tracks.

To bolster his chances, Garrett has a small collection of useful tools. His blackjack, dagger and bow can all take down an unwanted living obstacle, while flashbombs, grenades and noisemaker arrows provide handy distractions. New to the thieves' toolbelt this time round are the hand claws which allow any stone wall to be scaled in an instant, thus multiplying your options for exploration as well as offering an additional avenue of escape in case things go wrong.

Thief's gameplay arises out of the interplay between the guards' AI routines – crucially, they rely on sound as much as sight – and the player's ability to ensure Garrett leaves no trace of his presence. Light is his chief enemy throughout the game and so it comes as no surprise that Ion Storm has invested heavily in a dynamic lighting and shadowing system. Guards can now carry torches as they patrol with the resulting mobile light sources creating a new challenge for our master thief.

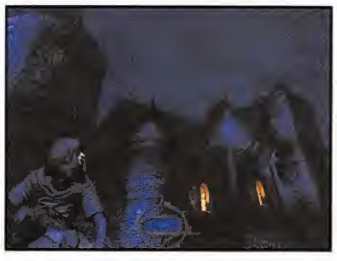
In an attempt to provide the player with heightened situational awareness (and presumably a more identifiable lead character), Ion Storm has implemented a third-person perspective so Garrett can be controlled in a manner similar to Sam Fisher or Solid Snake. Of course, those with a preference for first-person can still enjoy its greater sense of immersion.

Perhaps the most exciting new feature in Deadly Shadows is the addition of a free-roaming city environment. Here, Garrett can take some time out between missions to explore the City, eavesdrop on plot-fleshing-out conversations and, well, rob innocent people blind. Any loot pocketed during these discreet diversions can be used to purchase extra equipment for the next job – ample reward for the inquisitive player.

It's heartening to see the Looking Glass spirit still alive and well.

David Wildgoose

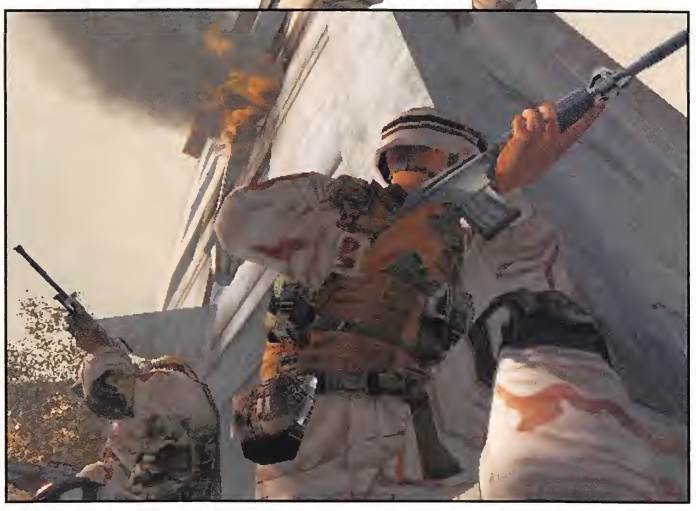
The first game, The Dark Project, focused on Garrett's efforts to topple the Trickster, a god of nature worshipped by superstitious pagans, and his plan to shroud the world in darkness. The sequel, The Metal Age, saw our hero forge an uneasy alliance with the Pagans in order to stop Karras, the leader of the Mechanists, and his plans of human subjugation by machine. The third sees the City's third faction, the Keepers, take centre stage and tells of a prophecy involving a brethren and betrayer. Garrett, for those asleep in the back, was once a Keeper himself...



Developer: **Ion Storm** Publisher: **Eidos** Distributor: **Atari** Due: **June**

Full Spectrum Warrior

It's not a new Battlezone title from Pandemic, but the same name is startlingly apt



Have you ever played a game where your crack squad of soldiers will just stand there when some punk leaps out and mows them down? I have and it sucks. I know I'm meant to be in charge, but anyone that dumb doesn't deserve to have a gun, let alone be on my crack team.

In Full Spectrum Warrior, not only will my squad act like they have a brain, but they'll act like real soldiers down to the most obsessive details. This baby will be the commercial version of the game intended to train the U.S. Army urban fire and movement procedures, army doctrine and leadership skills.

As your guys take up a formation, you'll see them scan for targets and automatically cover their own sector. Soldiers will lower their weapons as comrades move in front of them. Troops in the front line will go to one knee to let guys behind them sight the enemy, they will automatically sneak a peak around the corner when the form up there, and if they are given a command like securing a fallen foe, they will carry it out and then go back to cover.

If they are caught in the open, they will automatically hit the dirt and return fire. If they are in cover and fired upon, they will wait until you give the fire order before opening up, giving you the chance to check the area for civilians as well as making sure you obey the rules of engagement.

Your troops will all move in correct formations, according to army procedure, and you'll get a preview of how they will set-up as you move the group movement cursor towards walls, corners, cover or into the open. When you issue the move command you have the choice of having the squad move as one or do a "bounding" manoeuvre where only half of the team moves at any time so the other half can cover it.

One of the really nice touches with all of this is that you'll actually see your orders going down the chain of command from the team leader and then onto the individual units, and, in a game where seconds matter, it adds plenty of tension.

Issuing orders is pretty slick. You do it with group movement and fire commands and then tweak things with the ability to manoeuvre individuals one at a time to make the most of your cover, position your grenadiers or machine gunners and make sure every angle is covered. With a single click you can set a fire sector for your squad, locking down that approach in a second. If you want to get more specific with a group or individual you can zoom in and cover a particular window.

All up, you've got eight guys, broken into teams Alpha and Bravo and there will be a lot of emphasis on cramped-quarters co-ordinated strikes, distractions, suppression fire and flanking moves. All of this will be set against the backdrop of a fictional Middle East state with a set up pretty much transplanted from the movie Black Hawk Down.

Full Spectrum Warrior is looking very impressive, featuring some slick animation, a streamlined and smart interface, details like the fact that cars don't make good cover because they splinter under fire offer all of the authenticity you could ever want.

Now all we have to worry about is level design, but Pandemic has been around the block a couple of times so things are looking pretty good.

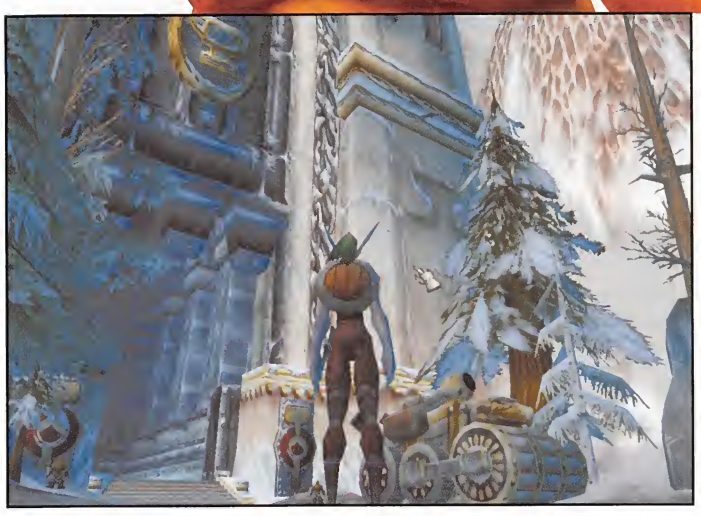
Timothy C. Best

The commercial version will skip some of the more gruelling aspects of a training sim while adding a little zing with slightly more extreme missions, additional firepower and some added off-field support that the army could, but probably wouldn't, have in place. Players can expect to run the gamut of urban combat scenarios (since that's what the sim is designed to do) with multiple objectives from tracking down missing heavy weapons to securing enemy leaders and rescuing hostages.

Developer: **Pandemic** Publisher: **THQ** Distributor: **THQ** Due: **September**

World of Warcraft

Now boasting the biggest man-boobs in gaming...



The Blizzard office is situated in a nondescript building in a nondescript part of California. No sign betrays the identity of the company hidden within the building's dull brick exterior. The Vivendi PR rep that accompanied yours truly explained that Blizzard is forced to keep its identity secretive to ward against stalkers. We can understand the concern - if you can think of a more disturbing idea that a Dorito crumb covered, hygienically challenged, basement dwelling, overweight, Yank fanboy stalker than we really don't want to know. We have a hard enough time sleeping already.

When the MMO genre first started it was easy to become excited every time a new game was announced but in the current climate where every developer in the known world seems to be putting out some form of massively multiplayer game it is much more difficult. It was with this slightly jaded air that I sat down to play a friends and family closed beta build of Blizzard's latest opus but within five minutes any cynicism was thrown aside. Instead of simply cruising on the popularity of the license, Blizzard has pulled out all stops with WoW. The years of development have been well spent tailoring one of the most refreshingly enjoyable MMO experiences to be offered yet. Right from the player's first spawn it is obvious that Blizzard have made the definite decision to make the game as fast paced and accessible as possible.

Players can create a character from one of eight races drawn from the popular RTS series. Although not markedly different from character creation screens seen in other MMOs, WoW offers a very streamlined approach allowing for players to get into the game a lot faster than usual and cutting down on the instances of getting a number of hours into the game only to realise that you character is, for want of a better term, crap. Each of the races has set attributes at time of character creation so all the player has to do is choose their race, class, name and physical features before they launch into the game proper.

Once in the game players are once again shown massive levels of accessibility. WoW conforms to the old school approach of a quest-based system. Instead of simply having to jump on the XP treadmill to level up high enough to get interesting quests, players are given their initial quest as soon as they first spawn. Although these quests are essentially about getting the player as much XP as possible as quickly as possible they display a nice range of objectives so as to never get truly tired. Another significant change in the structure of the game revolves around rewards for completed quests. When the player returns to the NPC to confirm the completion of the quest they are given their choice of items to select from a limited pool ensuring that each player will have a different experience during the game and fostering more inter-player trade.

Blizzard seem to have taken a leaf out of their own book when it comes to combat and leveling, combining the best parts of both the Diablo and Warcraft series into a very fast paced whole. Simply right clicking on a target instigates combat and all special moves can be either hotkeyed or placed as mouse tabs on the bottom of the screen. Leveling uses a skill-based system with a fairly extensive skill tree. The end result is far more akin to an action RPG rather than an MMO and should appeal to more action-oriented gamers as well as more hardcore online role-players.

There is still quite a while to go before World of Warcraft is released to the eagerly awaiting public but even at this stage of development the game is shaping up to be a hugely appealing and accessible, not to mention beautiful looking MMO. WoW already shows more polish than many MMOs that have received a commercial release so we can't wait to see what extra little touches Blizzard are going to add in the coming year.

Daniel Wilks

Developer: **Blizzard** Publisher: **Vivendi Universal** Distributor: **Vivendi Universal** Due: **Late 2004**

City of Heroes

Developer: Cryptic Studios
Due: TBC

This superhero MMO is in the midst of a rolling beta testing period and by all reports is coming along nicely. These new images illustrate two of the most recently implemented hero powers.

Football Manager 2005

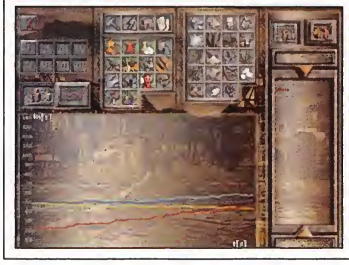
Developer: SI Games
Due: Late 2004

After parting ways with Eidos last year, Championship Manager developer SI Games has announced its next project – another soccer management game. Unlike Eidos' CM5, this is truly the next in the series.

Anno 1503: Treasures, Monsters & Pirates

Developer: Sunflowers
Due: June

Allegedly "eagerly awaited" add-on for EA's solid German strategy fest. New campaigns and missions allow the player to "set sail in search of treasures in a world of monsters and pirates." We kid you not.



Poacher

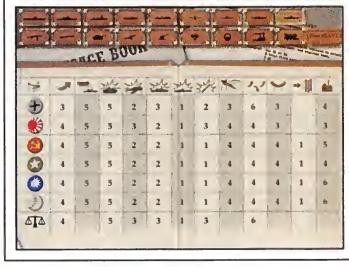
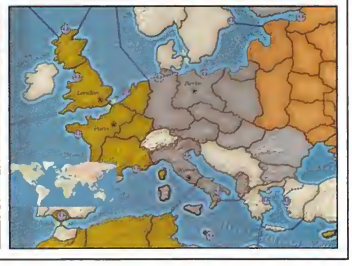
Developer: Exileworks
Due: TBC

Potentially interesting twist on the hunting genre, this FPS has you attempting to kill endangered species including rhinos and elephants while evading park wardens and vicious animals.

Gary Grigsby's World at War!

Developer: 2 by 3 Games
Due: Late 2004

Grognard legend Gary Grigsby returns with another hardcore wargame, this time depicting World War 2 from a global perspective rather than a specific theatre of war. Hex me up, baby!

Soldiers: Heroes of WWII

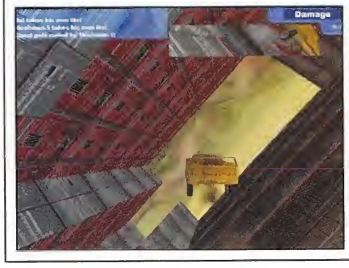
Developer: Best Way
Due: Q3 2004

Codemasters has recently signed up this game of squad-based tactical combat from Ukrainian developer Best Way. It boasts, amongst other things, "totally realistic penetration physics". Gulp.

Extreme Demolition

Developer: Flashpoint Games
Due: April

Wacky, zany racing thrillride created using the Torque engine and with a strong emphasis on online play. Jump over skyscrapers or play (American) football without leaving the driver's seat.



Catwoman

Developer: EA UK
Due: Q3 2004

Your chance to "be" Halle Berry in this nimble-footed action game. In a manner similar to Prince of Persia, we imagine, Catwoman can leap across roofs, run up walls and avoid enemy bullets.

Gangland

Developer: Whiptail Interactive
Due: Now (US)

Mobster sim with heavy roleplaying and real-time strategy aspects and an apparently non-linear, event-driven plot. It's already out in North America, but as yet no local distributor has opted to pick it up.

Creature Conflict

Developer: Cenega
Due: September

Turn-based strategy with skunks. Multiplayer games feature full voice support, "so not only will you be able to vaporise their Rabbit, but you can mock them as you do it!"

The Mysterious Island

Developer: Studio Calaris
Due: TBC

Nothing to do with the Jules Verne novel, this Polish developed adventure puts the player in charge of five friends shipwrecked on the eponymous island. Combat and puzzle solving complement its RPG leanings.

V8 Supercars 2

Developer: Codemasters
Due: April

A couple more screens of Codies' much awaited revhead sequel. It'll be out in a matter of weeks (if not days), so we promise this is its last appearance in Mini Previews. We'll have a review next issue.

The Sims 2

Developer: Maxis
Due: Q3 2004

Delayed from its intended March release, the sequel to the planet's best-selling game is now on track for a Q3 release. We're being drip-fed a handful of screenshots every week by EA. Here's two of them.

Nexus

Developer: Mithis Games
Due: September

The game previously known as Imperium Galactica 3, Nexus is a real-time spin on the Master of Orion space-empire building formula. You could even say it's the nexus between turn-based and RTS.

Armies of Exigo

Developer: Black Hole Games
Due: Q3 2004

EA has just signed up this promising real-time strategy title. Though the name is just a working title, we can tell you it features the curious prospect of battling above and underground simultaneously.

Steel Fang

Developer: Capcom
Due: TBC

A bizarre collaboration between Japanese giants Capcom and Sega has birthed this online action fest where players control big robots and their even bigger mech guardians while trying kill each other.

Vampire the Masquerade Bloodlines

Timothy C. Best thinks it's feeding time...

The World of Darkness is a world very much like our own ... but only when we're having a really bad day. It's a little dirtier, it's a little nastier and the things that go bump in the night are more than phantoms of an over active imagination, although, if they let you live, that's exactly what they claim to be.

In this world there is a fine balance between secret powers who have carved the world into vast stages where they are the puppet masters. One such power is the Kindred. This is the world of the Masquerade. This is the world of vampires.

A new prince, Sebastian LaCroix, has arisen in LA, bringing Camarilla rule to the once Anarchist Free State. Apparently, the freewheelers have let things spiral too far out of control, with inter-vampire warfare, were-wolves incursions and general unpleasantness.

This is not good news for you. You see, there are certain rules about who gets to make vampires and who gets to be one, and you break more than one of those.

Politics rather than compassion saves your neck. The prince decides to placate the Anarchs newly under his reign by sparing your life but, of course, there's a price. Now you are the Prince's creature ... for the time being at least.

Welcome to Bloodlines.

Troika has taken pains to make sure that its excursion into the World of Darkness hits all of the right notes, from high-gothic tone, to the story-line that White Wolf is accepting as a part of their official history.

All of this isn't enough, though, because Vampire: the Masquerade also needs the flipside of mirror shades, shotguns with white-phos rounds and action sequences to do John Woo proud.

To bring this World of Darkness to life Troika has ditched its usual isometric view and has gone for something with a little more viscera, namely Valve's super hot Half-Life 2 engine: Source.

That's really let them open a Pandora's box of whoop-arse.

"What we really want to do here is merge the action of the first-person shooter with a real RPG," says Troika founder, CEO and Games Producer Leonard Boyarsky.

"There's the different dialogue trees, the depth of character development, the choosing your own path as well as the immediacy of the first-person shooter. So it's not a click and wait kind of thing, it's more visceral."

Although Vampire is an RPG, thanks to the Source Engine, when you go guns-blazing it looks awfully like an FPS in action; when a character enters melee or pounces on an opponent to feed, you see the character walk into shot and, bang, you're in 3rd-person-action mode.

Unlike a true FPS, your character's skills contribute more to combat effectiveness than your aim, but these calculations are so far under the hood that if you catch a glimpse of them, then someone at Troika has messed up.

Using special powers like Celerity (which puts vampires into Matrix-style bullet-time), Auspex (which lets players see auras, even through walls) or Blood Boil (which turns a foe's blood against them and results in a lot of mess) is as simple as scrolling through powers with the mouse wheel and then right-

Developer: **Troika** Publisher: **Activision** Distributor: **Activision** Due: **2005**

clicking to activate, with each additional click adding to the level of the power and increasing its cost in blood.

The action in Vampire is fast and furious, but you really see the game's leanings when you learn that what most impressed Troika about Source was the way it pulls faces.

Putting on Your Game Face

"I'd say above all the facial animation is the number one thing that drew us to the engine," Boyarsky says.

"Being able to look someone in the eyes and see the emotional reaction on their face – it just brings up the immediacy of the roleplaying experience a hundred-fold."

In Bloodlines, you'll see evil smiles spread across faces and you'll watch rage seep into eyes that glint moistly and roll realistically. What's more, you'll see it all blend in with the eerily spot-on lip synching.

The 'jiggly-tech' in Vampire is shaping to be awesome all the way through, not just in the faces, but from the way cloth shifts, to how bodies move. The walking animation for Jeanette has a seduction all of its own.

Paths of Destruction

Then of course, we have the physics engine and, as Boyarsky explains, it seems to serve the RPG greater good as well: "We're trying to use it in as many places as possible because it's really fun and it's really adds a lot of interactivity to the world".

Sometimes it's going to come down to violence and other times you have to talk your way through … but most of the time you can take whatever you've pumped skill points into and play it to the hilt, whether that be strength, stealth, sorcery or seduction.

You'll be able to pry off loose planks in fences and sneak through them, shoot radiators turning them into explosive surprises, send enemies flying to their doom with punches or shot-gun blasts, build your strength to move large objects or to take inhuman leaps and lure victims into the safety of shadows to feed and so much more.

"Well basically, we have given you a lot of choices to make in this game," says our Producer who worked on Fallout with the two other core members of Troika.

This extends well beyond just the physical side, once you're off on assignment, and into which missions you choose to take and what outcome you are aiming for.

One of the early decisions players are faced with is whether to cover for a vampire who's blown his assigned task. It means more work for you, but if you help him, he assures you that he's the guy to hook you up, and promises you all the cheap weapons and ammo he had find. Do you help this guy out and open up a new resource and risk keeping secrets from the Prince or do you cash him in for brownie points?

"That's the kind of thing we are doing a lot of in this game," adds Boyarsky.

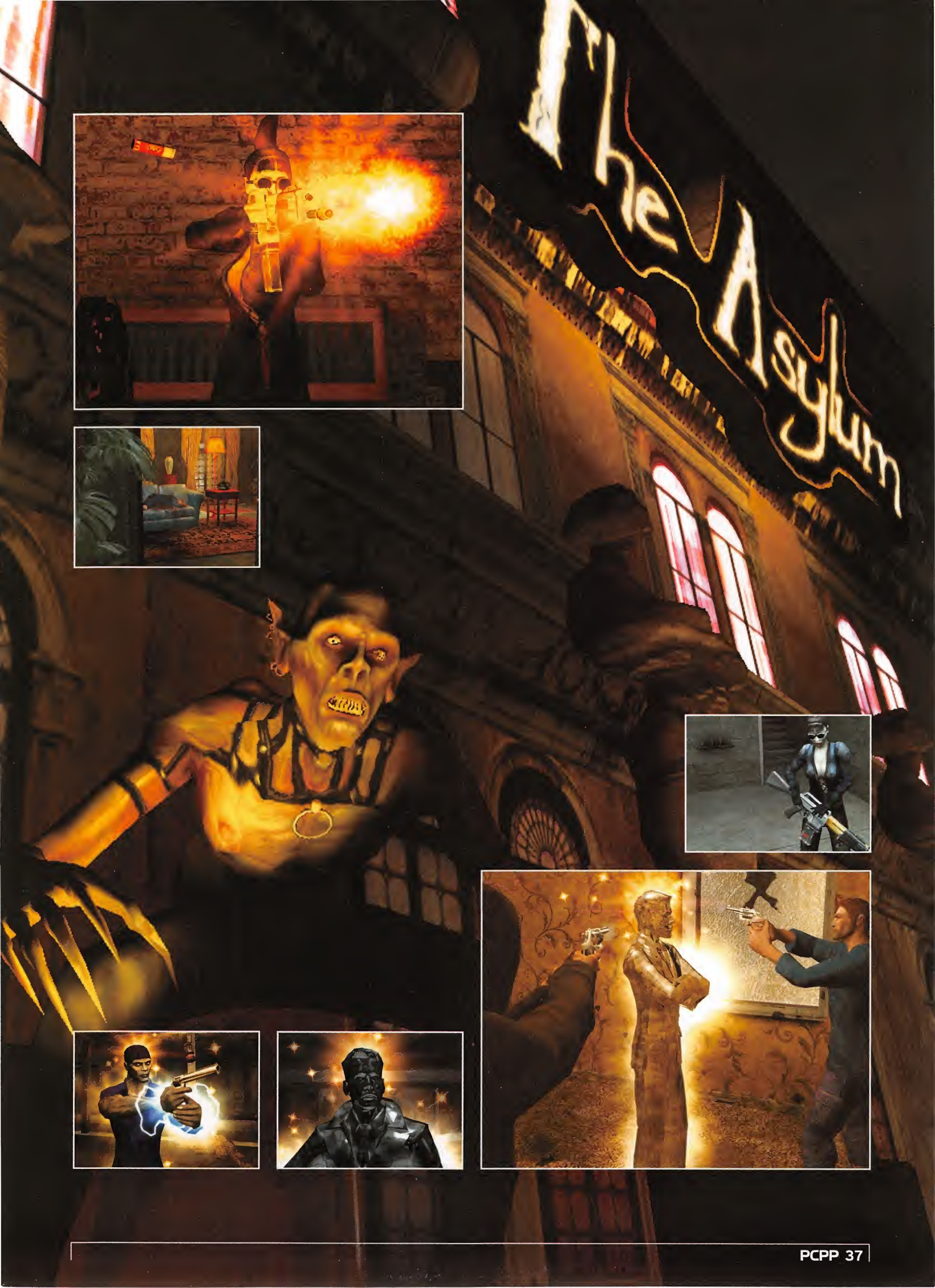
A little later you're likely to encounter two powerful, and allied, sisters who both want you to do things … different and conflicting things. You can be sure that when everything comes out in the wash they'll kiss and make up but you're not likely to get such friendly treatment – so you really want to watch what you do and say.

The team is aiming at having between 9,000 and 10,000 lines of dialogue populating trees that are affected by your actions, allies, skills, clan and powers. Different speech options like seduction or using your vampiric mind control are built right into the dialogue options and they can lead you down some interesting garden paths.

A New Sucker

Players will get to create their characters from scratch using a system that heavily mimics the pen-and-paper game, right down to the character sheets.

You can choose from all seven of different types of Camarilla vampire bloodlines from the artistic and foppish Toreadors, to the disfigured and shadow-hugging Nosferatu and then you spend points on skills, powers, backgrounds and attributes to make your blood-sucker unique. Players who choose the path of madness with the 'touched' Malkavanian bloodline will have a dialogue tree all of their own filled with oddness and cryptic sentences and what's more they actually hear


The Asylum

voices no one else can hear and, sometimes, they even tell the truth. Of course, each bloodline has a certain reputation and what you are will affect how everyone treats you, especially if you're Nosferatu; 'coz dude, you so ugly paper bags run when they see you coming.

Masquerade Ball

One of the central aspects of being a vampire is keeping humans in the dark about their existence. No-one wants all of the villagers with pitch-forks burning down their castles. This is the Masquerade.

Making people float into the air, moving faster than Carl Lewis and grabbing the clerk in the local fast food chain and having a happy meal are all out of the question when in view of the public. You get up to five violations and then it's game over.

Before that, you'll have police turning up, vampire assassins trying to silence you and over-zealous vampire hunters trying to stake their claim ... not to mention copping flack from the prince.

Besides just the Masquerade, players also have to worry about their Humanity and blood reserves. All the things that make you special as a vampire are powered by blood and as you start to run out there is a good chance that you'll frenzy and just grab the nearest person to snack on. That's not good for the concealment thing, nor is it good for your Humanity.

Things like killing innocents or committing vile deeds will eat away at you. As your Humanity approaches zero you'll find your dialogue option dry up as you fully give in to the beast and frenzy becomes your only friend.

Certain missions will increase either Humanity and or Masquerade points, but these are usually at odds. Humanity missions are done out of the goodness of your heart, whereas Masquerade missions are all about keeping your dark secret at all costs ... where did that reporter go?

If you hadn't guessed, the team is aiming a "Mature" rating and the tone is suitably dark. There's no way you can make a convincing trip into the twisted World of Darkness Vampire without some colourful

language, flesh-crafted abominations, party decorations made from human skins, and of course, plenty of blood – all of which Troika has in place. Let's just hope Troika keeps it the gothic and not schlock.

Welcome to a New World

This stark game world encompasses large free-roaming areas of Santa Monica, Hollywood, downtown LA, and China Town, including sub-areas like crypts, sewers, mansions, strip clubs, bars, churches and jewellery stores and strewn amongst the levels you'll find over 150 different characters with more than 3,000 unique animations. It's a large RPG, rendered with extreme FPS detail, right down to the junk you can send clattering in random alley ways.

Troika intends to play up the FPS angle by including several types of multiplayer games including a Chronicle Mode which will pit a team of Vampires against a team of Vampire Hunters and will sprawl over several maps, with the storyline changing to reflect victories on either side.

When I mentioned a NeverWinter Nights style DM or Story-Teller mode I was told that Troika is only talking about the Chronicles Multiplayer mode at the moment, so it's definitely possible.

All in all Bloodlines is looking very impressive, from the macabre graphics to the explosive gameplay and the intrigues which lead to different endings some much nastier than others. If Troika can get the balance between action and RPG options right, and brings its brand of open-ended storytelling to the table, it looks like Troika might have a quiet monster on its hands.

As your humanity approaches zero you'll find your dialogue options dry up as you fully give in to the beast

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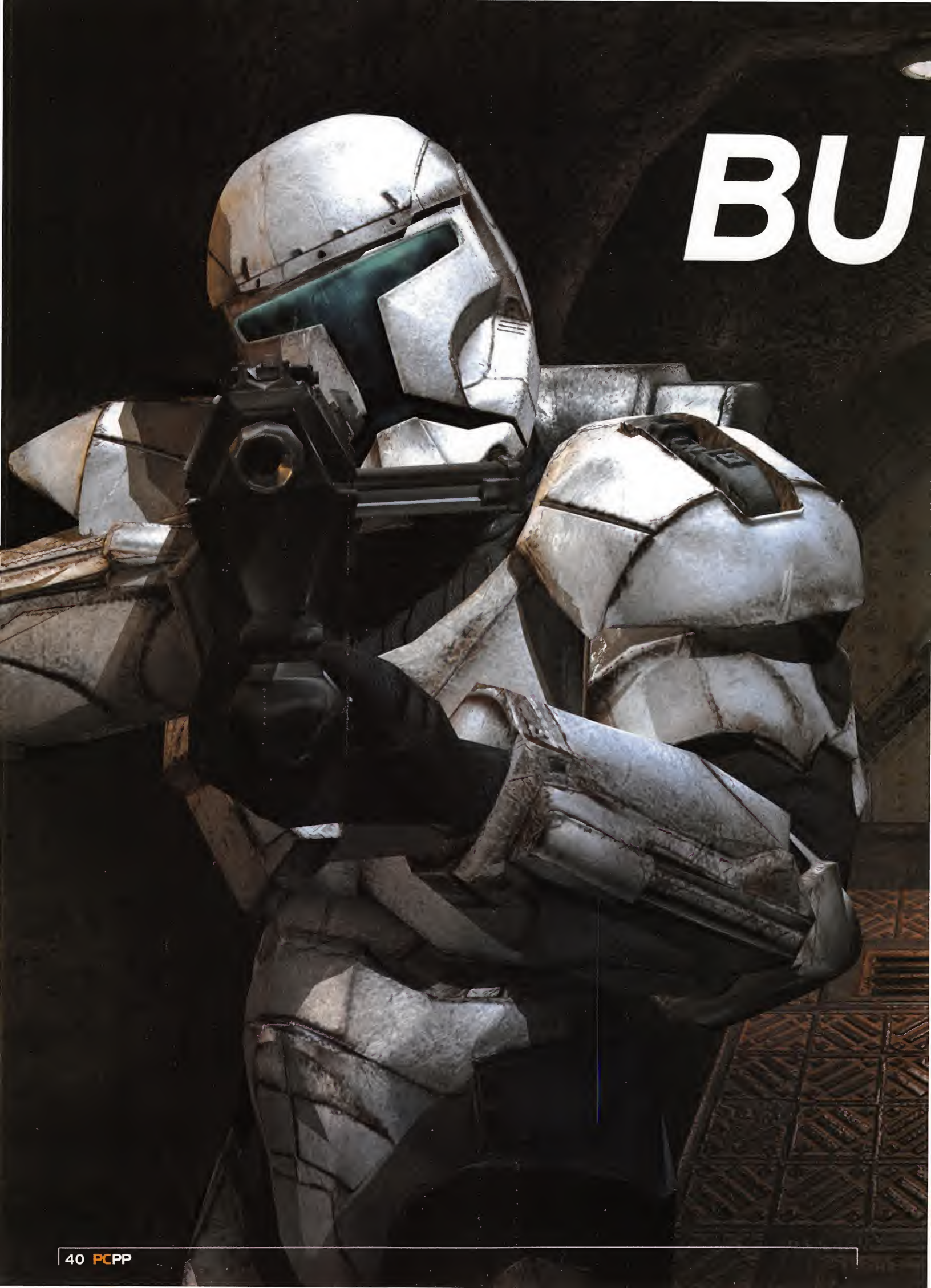

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LLET TIME

It's the hardcore PC gamer's genre of choice. It generates the most column inches and hype amongst the specialist press. It's consistently at the forefront of gaming technology and requires the heftiest set of system specs. It is of course the Shooter.

This issue we celebrate the Shooter in all its forms – first-person, third-person, online, offline. First up, **Timothy C. Best** force pulls the scoop on Republic Commando, the first non-Dark Forces shooter from LucasArts set in the Star Wars universe. Next, **Anthony Fordham** hits R to reload and then reports on (almost) every shooter in development. Finally, we reveal our Ten Shooter Commandments – our instructions to game designers everywhere on how to make a Half-Life beater rather than the next Daikatana. Time to set your phasers to kill...

Star Wars: Republic Commando

If you're thinking shiny lightsabres, farm boys and "Luke, I am your father," then you're way off base on this one. You've never seen Star Wars quite like this.

Talking to Steve Matulac and Matt Fillbrandt, the game's Producer and Assistant Producer, there are more references to the James Cameron's Aliens and Ridley Scott's Black Hawk Down than bumbling Gungans or sensing the good in major bad guys.

While the cameras are rolling on all of those Jedi and Clone Troopers in the end of Episode 2: Attack of the Clones, the Republic Commando and his team are deep in the tunnels under the action taking care of the messes that hot-heads and Princesses leave behind.

Republic Commando is a first-person shooter that sees the players running point for a team of no-nonsense, genetically engineered, military spec-ops unit.

"The best parallel I can draw is if you think of Black Hawk Down, and that story, and you merge it with Star Wars to get a sense of the feeling we're going for," says Matulac.

The game infiltrates the Clone Wars and looks into the corners that are dark, gritty and militaristic. The guys try to tell me that it's just darker in colour, setting and tone, not darker like in that side of

Developer: **LucasArts** Publisher: **EA** Distributor: **EA** Due: **Late 2004**

the force, but it seems pretty close to me. Players take charge of a full-on wetworks team and Fillbrandt says missions reflect what you'd expect from a special operative team in a combat setting: "You may be going in to assassinate a high-ranking official on the Separatist side; you might be doing demolitions work or maybe hostage rescue.

"There are all kinds of mission types, in this game, that give fans a look into that aspect of Star Wars, and it's not something that they've seen before."

Leader of the Pack

To capture the military feel LucasArts has moved away from your typical epic hero and towards making the majority of the missions a tactical affair which uses military precision and teamwork to get the job done.

Fillbrandt gives us the brief: "We have come up with a system that is low-maintenance but which gives the player the feeling that they are in command of the squad from both the behavioural standpoint and by giving them direction to do different things like take up sniping positions, set bombs, disarm traps and do door breaches."

Matulac adds that controlling the squad shouldn't be a baby sitting job and that LucasArts is aiming to make them an extension of the player and a weapon at their disposal. These guys will take cover when under fire, heal one another between engagements and investigate noises as well as straight out kicking arse.

The combination of solid AI and smart cursors should give players a lot of free-flowing control. On the behavioural side, you can order your squad-mates to seek and destroy, to clear rooms or to defend an area or even protect your character.

Furthermore, if your crosshairs go over something with possible courses of actions tied to it, you get ghosted images of your troops taking up various options so you can select the best one at a glance. Say you come to a door; you might see an icon of your troops hacking the electronic lock for a stealthy entrance as well as the option for a door breach. If you click the second icon you can watch as your squad forms up on the door, blows it open, lobs in a grenade and then charges through.

Even something as simple as crates can offer up options. Maybe they would make great cover so they'll let you assign one commando to take up a sniper position while the others form up on you. Reforming your team is only a couple of keystrokes away.

It looks like LucasArts has come up with a quick and flexible squad system that gives you a run-and-gun system for flanking manoeuvres, decoy runs, setting ambushes and covering each other's butt like an actual squad with some actual military flair.

Military Character

Having guys that walk the walk is one thing, having them talk the talk is another and LucasArts is aiming for that team flavour we've come to know and love in movies like Aliens and Predator.

"Even though they are all clones we've come up with a device that helps keep the player straight which is that the clones have different personalities and styles, which will be reflected in the voice work," says Matulac.

Lucas has actually hired different actors to impersonate Temuera Morrison's Jango Fett to bring your troopers to life and they hope to have your character voiced by the man himself, but that's still in negotiation.

All of this isn't going to waste as players will be continually treated to his unit's radio chatter. Beyond the colour commentary you'll also hear when your guys are low on ammo, have bogies in the area or if they are in trouble.

The whole game is played through the visor of the lead character, with your HUD always visible. Here you'll see how your weapons are going and the status of your health and protection. This game wisely borrows from the Halo formula with the recharging shield and the ability to swap between two weapons.

You'll have to keep the DC-17 blaster rifle but you can fill the second slot with any thing your foes drop. Having to hold onto the basic rifle isn't the trial it could be because it has different modules that let you change it between assault, grenade launcher and sniping modes, which gives you options as you advance through the game.

In the Wars

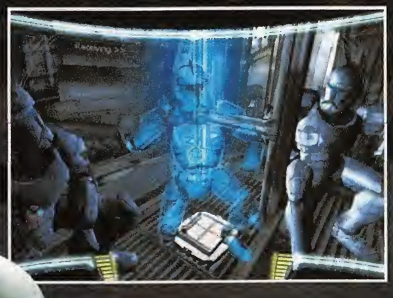
Although there are three main campaigns, they encompass over 13 environments, which range from the underground caverns of the bug-like Geonosians, to a derelict Republic Assault ship and even to the world of Kashyyk where you battle the reptilian Trandoshans on the ground before heading up into the Wookie tree-cities.

If you were wondering, all of this is hardcore. Without being protected by the force -or the hopes of kiddy merchandising – everything gets a lot scarier, even the battle droids.

"That character type has been somewhat of a comical foil in both Episodes 1 and 2, where they're stumbling over one another and doing the Roger, Roger bit," says Fillbrandt.

"We've taken that model and made it a more serious killing-machine."

Matulac adds that some Separatist



Without being protected by the force – or the hopes of kiddy merchandising – everything gets a lot scarier, even the battle droids.

Droid sequences have a real Terminator feel to them and that that's not the only place from which they've borrowed a spooky sci-fi feel.

In one sequence players will find themselves in the deep Geonosians caverns and all around them they'll hear insect clicking.

Pods surround them on the floor and hang from the ceiling and you're not sure if they've spotted you. Then it hits the fan. You start shooting the pods and sometimes it takes care of the guy inside, other times he bursts out to attack you.

You run into a pitch-black room with your headlamp only throwing out feeble pools of light. Then you notice something. The roof is really high and it's covered. With a buzzing of insect wings the Geonosian warriors are in motion, falling on you from above and behind ... at that stage all you're missing is Bill Paxton dressed as a Clone Trooper.

Of course, not all of the action is creepy, some of it is just plain intense.

For example, the Trandoshans like to use shotguns until you piss them off when they draw big-arse knives. That would be okay except for the fact that they also have salvage droids trying to swarm you and attach to your head so they can scrap your helmet. If having swarming robots stuck to your face wasn't bad enough, they also jam your display so everything fills which static... and you still have the berserk guys with giant knives to deal with.

Each enemy will have certain strengths and you'll have to use your team-mates, strategy and thermal detonators to take them down – there ain't no Jedi around here to save your bacon.

That's not to say you won't come across any interesting characters in your travels. The team tells me that the game features several new characters from Episode 3 and being able to interact with them really seems to be sending hardcore fans into raptures.

Commando Performance

Republic Commando seems to be shaping up to be more than just Rainbow Six: Star Wars Yesterday. The squad system sounds more fluid than what we've seen before and your team mates seem to be much more intelligent, dangerous and independent than most games have even considered handing you. They are a weapon which opens up a range of tactics and replay options.

Beyond that, Commando offers up a range of foes, weapons from Wookie Bowcasters to EMP grenades, a variety of gritty military missions in extraordinary sci-fi settings and pretty graphics thanks to a modified Unreal engine.

It will come with multiplayer and most of the modes you've come to expect but for some reason it's humans only, so don't expect your computer-controlled squad to get in on the action for any of the game types. Oh yeah, there's no co-op mode for the campaigns either, which is a pity.

On the bright side LucasArts will be releasing a game editor for Republic Commando some time after launch, which is really cool because in the past LucasArts hasn't been hip to letting people fiddle with their Star Wars properties – so this is a real step forward.

Overall the basic design seems to be really tight, but long time fans have to wonder how much of the Star Wars feel you can capture in Black Hawk Down mode. What's more we have to see how well LucasArts manages its level design to provide a good balance of challenge and opportunities to use your clever little team mates.

To us, Republic Commando sounds like a weird little title – where are the Jedi, where's the Princess with the blaster? – but after having a look into the war room the idea is definitely growing on us. Let's see whether this game can show that while the Force is good, sometimes an armed force is better.

Alpha Black Zero

Developer: Khaeon
Publisher: Playlogic
Web: www.alpha-black-zero.com
Due: Autumn 2004

In which an unjustly accused elite assassin must clear his name by embarking on squad-based missions through expansive landscapes and indoor installations. Missions are alleged to include base capture followed immediately by base defence, in which the player must manage their squad to defend against enemy attack waves. Will use a basketball-court style training arena to improve weapon skills. Also includes the unique feature of tasking the player with inserting "Nano Fungus" into enemy systems.

Beyond Normandy: Assignment Berlin

Developer: Elite Forces
Publisher: ValuSoft
Web: www.valu-soft.com
Due: 2004

Okay so we need another World War 2 shooter like we need another outbreak of thin leather ties, but Assignment Berlin intends to hit a gamer's most sensitive spot and hit it hard - their hip pocket. Priced as an ultra-value title, Assignment Berlin will feature last year's graphics, will run on last year's PCs and will be completely and utterly familiar to everyone who loves WW2 shooters. Includes historically accurate weapons, which is WW2-speak for "crap".

Blood Rayne 2

Depending on your perspective, BloodRayne was either the most original and unusual game you saw last year or a horrible pile of cack that should never have been released. The point being that the game polarised opinion. Gamers just couldn't seem to agree whether or not a slinky vampire chick with a machine gun in each hand jumping on a Nazi soldier, wrapping her thighs around his head and humping him to death was a good or bad thing. To which we can only say, what the hell is wrong with you?

This year, BloodRayne is scheduled to return with a new weapons system, an even sexier player model and more blood. While keeping the acrobatic insanity that defined the original, BR2 expands this by allowing the player to fight while dangling off things - poles, overhead wires, walls, mesh fences and the faces of dying opponents. Rayne will also be able to slide along rails, for high speed combat chases and death-defying parallel rail leaps.

Players of the original complained about the somewhat random nature of the combat combos, so Terminal Reality has returned combo control back to the player. The overhauled combat system promises to play like a combination of beat-em-up and traditional FPS. Swank!

Developer: Terminal Reality Publisher: Majesco Web: www.bloodrayne2.com Due: October 2004

Breed

Developer: Brat Designs
Publisher: CDV
Web: www.breedgame.com
Due: Soon

"Der Halo-killer is da: Breed!" Thus spake German gaming megasite giga.de, and who are we to disagree? We're looking at a sci-fi shooter that pits humans against an almost-unstoppable alien horde. Equipped with an increasingly outlandish array of weapons and access to space fighters and tanks, the player must smash, stomp, blast, burn and pinch their way through escort missions, raids, 'tactical withdrawals' and out 'n' out bloodbaths. So think Halo, except by a different developer.

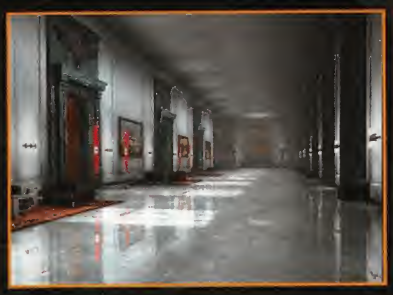
Chronos

Developer: Saber
Publisher: TBA
Web: www.saber3d.com
Due: 2004

These guys developed Will Rock... wait come back! Okay so Will Rock wasn't that great, but judging from Chronos' screenshots, this second iteration of the admittedly fairly able (if unspectacular) Saber3D engine looks moderately tasty. Saber is keeping quiet about game details, but we can surmise that the player must fight through garishly lit sci-fi settings blowing up Will Rock's monsters in pursuit of some undefined goal. The title also suggests time-travel may be involved.

Das Reich 2005

Developer: Joylabs
Publisher: TBA
Web: www.joylabs.de/games.htm
Due: TBA



The only thing better than fighting Nazis in WW2 is fighting Nazis in an alternate-future 2005. In this world, the Reich hasn't fallen, in fact it's gone from strength to strength. And so it follows that the various Resistance movements have become even more convoluted in their politics. The player must balance affiliation with each faction in order to further everyone's common goal - getting the chance to fight Hitler in a powersuit!

Dead Man's Hand

Developer: Human Head
Publisher: Atari
Web: www.dmhgame.com
Due: 2004

Westerns are surprisingly thin on the ground in the FPS genre, possibly due to the sales performance of the unremarkable but ultimately underrated Outlaws (remember that one folks?). Dead Man's Hand appears - from the sketchy details eked out by the developer - to be a revenge Western in which an ex-member of feared outlaw gang The Nine first gets picked on by his ex-buddies and then rides out in search of glorious vengeance. Includes shotguns.

Dead Next Door

Developer: The Zombie Squad
Publisher: TBA
Web: www.deadnextdoor.com
Due: TBA

The developer counters the assertion that his game is a rip-off of Resident Evil by saying that Resident Evil is itself a rip-off of the film he's basing his game on. Confused? Don't be: Dead Next Door is all about shooting zombies, preferably in the brain. The player is an isolated member of the Zombie Squad, and must fight their way back to righteousness. The developer is "surprised" that the game doesn't currently have a publisher.

Conflict Vietnam

Conflict Desert storm was relatively well received among those who weren't content to just do the shootin' thing with one guy but needed a whole squad to send to their deaths. Set in the first Iraq War (we used to call it the Gulf War, but that was back when we still remembered that Saddam used to be bankrolled by the US) the game featured plenty of desert, plenty of tanks, and plenty of shooting.

Unlike all the WW2 shooter developers who are flipping forward through time to the Vietnam War, Pivotal is bucking the trend and flipping back through time... to the Vietnam War.

With a new engine that can handle the requisite jungle, mud and napalm after-effects, Conflict Vietnam will cover the bitter end of the war starting with the Tet Offensive in 1968 and finishing up with gruesome street-to-street fighting in the city of Hue.

The squad command elements of the game - which will be the third in the Conflict series - have been tweaked to make it easier to order your squaddies about. In the thick of combat, it might be difficult to click on specific objects, so the command system has been made context sensitive - click vaguely near a truck with a drive command, and your squaddie will be smart enough to figure out what to do. Ingenious!

Developer: Pivotal Publisher: SCI Web: www.pivotalgames.com Due: Q3 2004

Doom 3

Developer: id Software
Publisher: Activision
Web: www.doom3.com
Due: 2004

With the likes of Far Cry, Half-Life 2 and Stalker all due this year (or maybe next, ahem) do you, like us, get the feeling that id Software is currently desperately upgrading the Doom 3 engine to be even more spectacular than it was originally going to be, since the competition this time round actually looks tough? Whatever, the final results can only be even better for us gamers.

Firestarter

Developer: GSC
Publisher: TBA
Web: www.firestarter-game.com
Due: April 2004

"Know your enemy and maybe he lets your soul stay in." Oh yes, Firestarter is

Ukrainian and it's coming at us from the same crazy Ukrainian team as STALKER. In Firestarter the player is trapped in a giant virtual reality and has only 48 hours to Save the World (tm). Five characters to choose from, 20 weapons and a host of special abilities should ensure plenty of replay value. Think of it as a STALKER teaser.

Kreed

Developer: Burut
Publisher: Russobit-M
Web: www.kreed3d.com
Due: Q3 2004

Featuring the adventures of Main Hero as he gallantly fights to save Earth from the Tiglaary Death Factories. No wait, the Tiglaary Death Factories were in the past,

nowadays the main threat to Earth is the mysterious Red Sector, which gets people belonging to KREED all excited. Burut promises a variety of tasks, including base capture, ship capture, hostage rescue and formation fighting. The practical upshot of which is that you can expect a lot of shooting.

Kuma\War

Developer: Kuma
Publisher: Kuma
Web: www.kumawar.com
Due: Regular updates

Something a little different for reality fans, Kuma\War is a subscription-only game where missions are released periodically over the Internet. The thing about these missions is that they're all based on real missions the real US Army has undertaken. Presumably the player will only get access to declassified victorious missions, so don't expect Black Hawk Down 2: The Baghdad Story for at least 10 years. Current confirmed missions include the 'takedown' of Usay and Qusay Hussein, and a Taliban fish-in-barrel shoot.

Half-Life 2

Developer: Valve
Publisher: Vivendi
Web: www.halflifesource.com
Due: 2004-2005

Oddly enough there's no glossy official website for Half-Life 2, possibly because Valve is still sulking about that unfortunate source code leak. Conspiracy

theories abound about the actual reality of this game - was everything we saw in those cool E3 videos faked? Is Valve taking the extra time to actually add a game to its cool graphics? Or are all our fears unfounded and will Half-Life 2 be the greatest thing ever? You choose.

Hitman: Contracts

Developer: IO
Publisher: Eidos
Web: www.hitmancontracts.com
Due: Q3 2004

Number three in a series of bald-headed shooter/puzzle games, Hitman Contracts promises to ditch the slightly too militaristic focus of Hitman 2 and return to the franchise's core gameplay - running around in public with no hair shooting guns at random. IO has learnt from the previous games - the first game had too many puzzles, second game had too much shooting of soldiers. Expect a tasty balance of the two for chapter three.

Painkiller

There have been a few Heaven vs Hell games on the PC over the years, most of which tend to, shall we say, make it to the bargain bins fairly quickly. Will Painkiller avoid this noisome fate? It's probably too early to tell, but the graphics sure do look purty.

Daniel Garner has been killed in an "horrific" car accident, hopefully involving genital dismemberment. Schlong-less and naturally expecting to go straight to heaven, Daniel is somewhat perturbed to find himself in a shadowy halfway place between heaven and hell.

The powers that be have chosen Daniel to lead the resistance against an upcoming invasion of unholy beasties. The more beasties Daniel pulverises, the closer he is to both purification and finding out why it is he has been chosen for this interminable quest.

Running the bespoke PAIN engine, People Can Fly claims the game can pump out "at least 100 times" the polygons of "some other shooters." Vague perhaps, but the developer also promises tasty visual treats such as soft shadows, DOT3 bump mapping, water reflections, glass simulation, you know, the same stuff that everyone has.

Multiplayer promises "a return to old school shooters while bringing gameplay up to date with the inclusion of mind-blowing graphics, insane physics and input from hundreds of hardcore gamers worldwide." Ahem.

Developer: **People Can Fly** Publisher: **Dreamcatcher** Web: **www.painkillergame.com** Due: **April 2004**

Hollow
Developer: ZootFly
Publisher: TBA
Web: TBA
Due: Q4 2004

It's safe to say that this is the only game in the whole roundup whose press release regularly includes the phrase "disco-totalitarian". See, the game is set in an alternate 1970s where World War 2 never took place. The "disco-totalitarian" state of Centrope is where the hero finds himself, charged with the murder of his girlfriend. The game boasts the usual collection of weapons, except for the intriguing "deboner". Disco Stu likes!

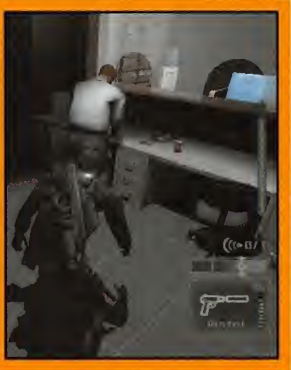
MOH: Pacific Assault
Developer: EA
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Web: www.eagames.com/official/moh/
Due: Q4 2004

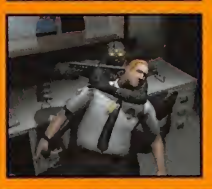
We all loved MOH: Allied Assault, right? And if we didn't, we knew some nut who did. The next logical step is a Pacific theatre version, not to be confused with the console-tastic MOH: Rising Sun. EA has rebuilt great sweaty chunks of the engine to make the game even more malaria-tastic (it's a Pacific island reference, people) while maintaining the expected mix of runnin', gunnin' and driving cool vehicles. Will Grandpa want a go? Probably not.

Neuro
Developer: Revolt
Publisher: Russobit-M
Web: www.russobitm.ru/eng/games/neuro
Due: TBA

"Neuro is based on special abilities of the main character who can take under psi-control his enemies and feel himself in their hats," says publisher Russobit-M and who are we to disagree? Walk a few miles in the hat of the exotically-named Craig Richards (it sounds excitingly foreign to Russians, okay?) on the crazily-named planet Sorgo, and find out what it means to be able to psi-control enemies even as you blow them away with massive chunks of hardware.

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow





Oh just fantastic. In an effort to choose a theatre of conflict that hasn't been hashed and rehashed a thousand times, Ubi Soft has decided to set Pandora Tomorrow in East Timor, where the US military is helpfully training "the world's youngest democracy" in the face of anti-US resentment high up in the Indonesian government. The fact that all this is happening in Australia's back yard and that the bad guys are a country that we really don't want to be unduly pissing off just makes playing this all the more spicy and suspenseful. After all, in the unlikely event that Indonesia successfully invades Australia, Pandora Tomorrow will become illegal, and you could be jailed just for owning it! Whahey!

Anyway, Pandora Tomorrow will continue the proud tradition of Splinter Cell by giving the player even more control over the hero, Sam Fisher. Sam will also get access to a veritable toybox full of cool new guns and other funky spy-type devices. Ubi Soft is keeping the lid on the new toys for now, but reassures us that all the gadgets Sam had in the original will return for the second game.

Ubi Soft is less clear on whether or not control issues will be addressed. Splinter Cell played well on the Xbox but suffered from "I need thirteen fingers"-syndrome on PC, unless using a gamepad. Here's hoping.

Developer: **Ubi Soft** Publisher: **Ubi Soft** Web: **www.splintercell.com** Due: **Q4 2004**

Operation Flashpoint 2
Developer: Bohemia
Publisher: Codemasters
Web: www.flashpoint2.com
Due: Q4 2004 - Q1 2005

Operation Flashpoint was our reader Game of the Year in 2002 and there's no surprise why.

This freeform battle simulator gave the player unprecedented access to a massive range of not only weapons, but vehicles too. The player took the part of an almost

magical Special Forces operative who could drive trucks, tanks, helicopters and even jet fighters. What a man!

Flashpoint 2 promises to modernise the whole experience. While the first game was set in the heart of the Cold War, the sequel shifts the focus to the present day. It's all about pre-emptive strikes rather than a war of attrition and brinkmanship against the evil commies. Paradrop into hapless Middle-Eastern principates, commandeer every available piece of military hardware, and blow the crap out of those filthy terrorists before they can say "half a tonne of fertiliser thanks, mate."

Bohemia promises the "most complex war game experience ever." The focus will definitely be on large scale combat with upwards of a hundred units involved in each operation - soldiers, tanks, supply units, helicopters - both attack and recon - and of course lovely jets such as the A-10 Warthog, great for getting the mould out of all those hard-to-reach places.

Psychotoxic

Developer: NuClearVision
Publisher: Pending
Web: www.nuclearvision.de
Due: TBA

Publisher CDV has dumped Psychotoxic, those heartless bastards. But NuClearVision is undeterred. There's NO WAY these plucky boys from Germany are going to compromise their creative vision. The cow with the machine-guns on its udder instead of teats is STAYING. As for the rest of the game, a huge-breasted heroine must shoot the crap out of New York to save it from either nuclear bombardment or giant garish pink rabbits. The screenshots kind of make it hard to tell.

Sabotain

Developer: Avalon Style
Publisher: Akella
Web: www.akella.com
Due: Q2 2004

Despite having the subtitle "Break the Rules", Sabotain seems pretty damn conventional at first glance. The Empire and the Confederation are inevitably at war and the player must infiltrate Confederation installations to bring the bad guys down from the inside. Yet, are the bad guys really bad? Or are the good guys bad? Or, as more factions are added, are both the good guys and the bad guys bad, and are the real good guys someone else entirely? With guns.

Soldner

Developer: Wings Simulations
Publisher: JoWood
Web: www.secretwars.net
Due: Q2 2004

Fighting historical recreations of perfectly legal (or at least, semi-legal) wars can get a little dry. That's why in 2010, Wings Simulations believes it will be more fun to be part of a mercenary force fighting illegal undeclared wars from naval vessels disguised as non-combatant ships. Seriously though, Soldner promises a dynamic campaign system and a complex diplomatic model to make your gunplay even more fraught with legal consequence. Think Falcon 4's dynamic battlefield meets Black Hawk Down.

Stalker

The official site for PCPP's most nervously anticipated game of 2004 still refers to the game as STALKER: Oblivion Lost, but apparently the game is now definitely, officially and positively subtitled Shadow of Chernobyl. Honestly, we could write previews of STALKER every month if we didn't think you'd rip them out and post them back to us, we're just THAT INTERESTED in the game. (Very dry - Sardonic Ed)

Of course the big question is this: will STALKER be all things to all men, or just another shooter worthy only of rubbing its shoulders with the admittedly very able but perhaps less than spectacular, gameplay-wise, likes of Far Cry? Give yourself ten points if you understood that last sentence.

The point, as we have made so often, is that GSC is promising SO MUCH with this game and to this day has revealed so very little. The bits we've been shown us look great. But are they representative of the whole game? Please do hold your breath.

The fact that everything we know about the game has been translated from Russian - usually badly - makes it even more infuriatingly imprecise. Some bits of the game look absolutely mind-numbingly awesome. It looks, in short, like STALKER is set to make the same kind of impact as Half-Life once did. But it's so damn hard to be sure!

Developer: **GSC** Publisher: **THQ** Web: **www.stalker-game.com** Due: **2004**

Shellshock: Nam '67

Developer: Guerrilla
Publisher: Eidos
Web: www.shellshockgame.com
Due: TBA

There are a few Vietnam War games around now, and the main problem with all of them is that they gloss over all the stuff that really defined the Vietnam War: illegal bombings of neighbouring countries, civilian massacres and a military drug culture. Shellshock doesn't shy away from any of that, so if having to explain why you just napalmed a whole village "in order to save it" sounds like fun, this is the game for you.

Sin 2

Developer: Ritual
Publisher: TBA
Web: www.ritualistic.com
Due: TBA

Sin was a great game. It pioneered the tradition of pushing incomplete, buggy products on an unsuspecting public. Ritual also hired Killcreek for a while. Little is known about the new game so far, since Ritual has only teased us with two screenshots. However, we can honestly say that the evil Elexis Sinclaire's breasts are now so ridiculously overstuffed with saline that the nipples appear to point straight up. Perhaps we'll be able to shoot them right off. Perhaps.

Utopia City

Developer: Parallax Arts
Publisher: TBA
Web: www.utopiareal.com
Due: TBA

Ever see that episode of Red Dwarf where Rimmer ends up destroying his own perfect virtual world because he hates himself so much? Utopia City has a similar premise, except that the real world is being destroyed because everyone wants to live in the perfect virtual world. As an elite Remover, the player must either 'save' people from Utopia, or side with the computer Mastermind to maintain the digital reality.

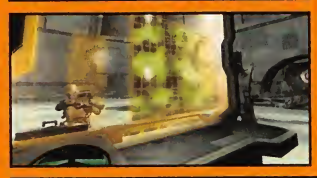
Tribes Vengeance

Tribes is one of those games that either you're indifferent to, or you love with the burning passion of Casanova, Don Juan and that chick who had to bonk guys all the time or her whole island would sink PUT TOGETHER. Tribes was showing players squad-based shootin' over massive outdoor maps with access to a variety of vehicles way back when the likes of Unreal were still stuck running through corridors.

Then, after the release of Tribes 2, it all seemed to be over. Sierra disbanded developer Dynamix and Tribes seemed destined to live on only in the hearts, minds and hard drives of its modest but passionate fanbase.

Tribes Vengeance is a return to goodness. And it brings with it a singleplayer mode for the first time in the series. The Empire and the Tribes have been at war pretty much forever, and now that the conflict has spanned several generations, one mother has taken it upon herself to discover the truth behind the hurtin' and the fightin', while another heir makes it his duty to break free from the cycle of vengeance.

What's double-plus good about Tribes Vengeance is that it's being developed right here in Australia by Irrational, also responsible for the tasty System Shock 2. Start drooling!



Developer: Irrational Publisher: Vivendi Web: www.tribesvengeance.com Due: Q4 2004

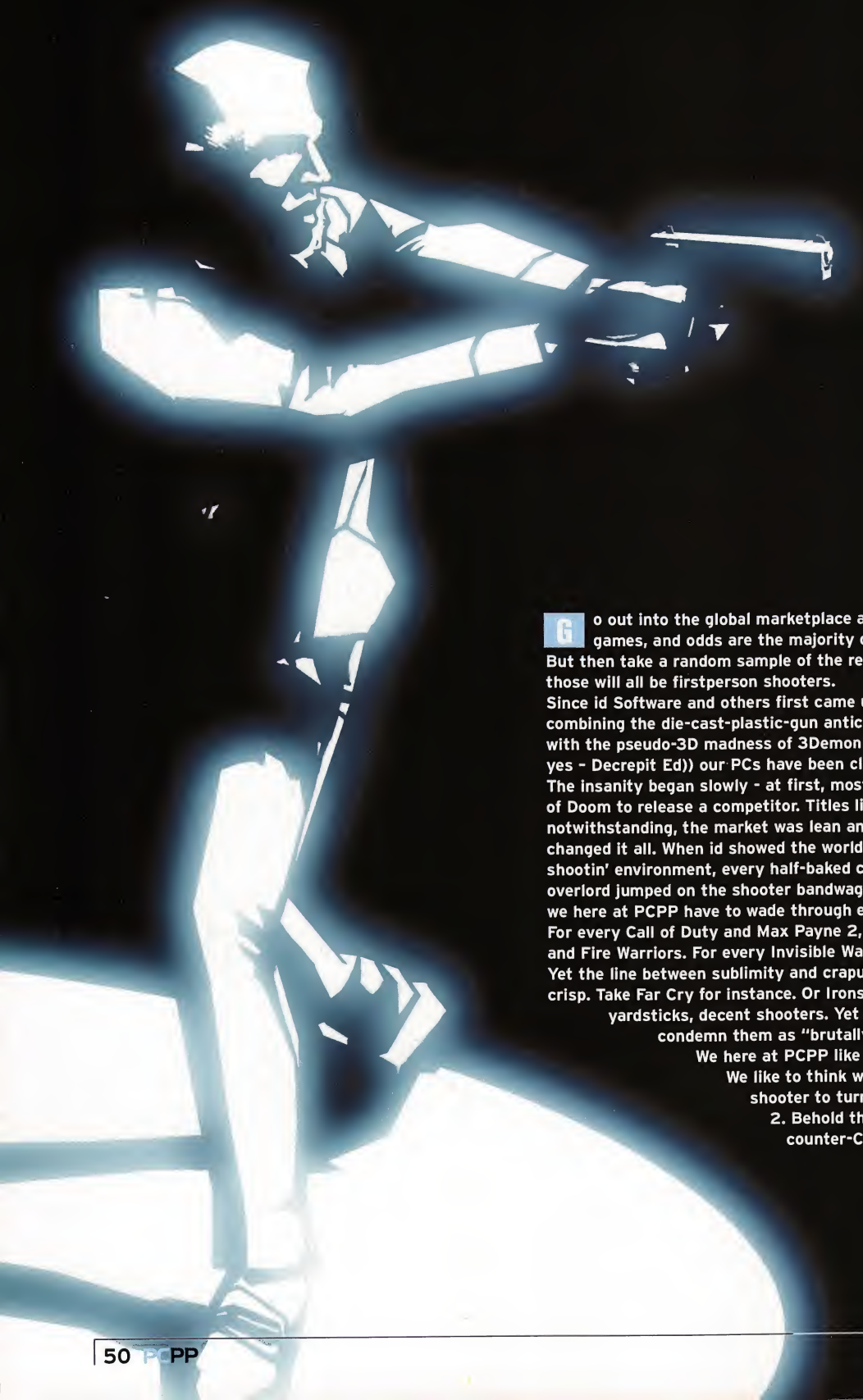
Wehrwolf

Developer: Discus
Publisher: Electronic Paradise
Web: www.wehrwolf.ru
Due: 2004

According to the slogan of Discus, "life is game." And we suppose it is. Game enough to create the highly specific sub-genre of the Nazi-busting FPS, anyway. Refreshingly though, Wehrwolf appears to approach the topic from an unfamiliar direction - rather than being a plucky US Marine, the player is instead a plucky specialist in the Red Army.

THUS SPAKE POWERPLAY

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF SHOOTER DESIGN



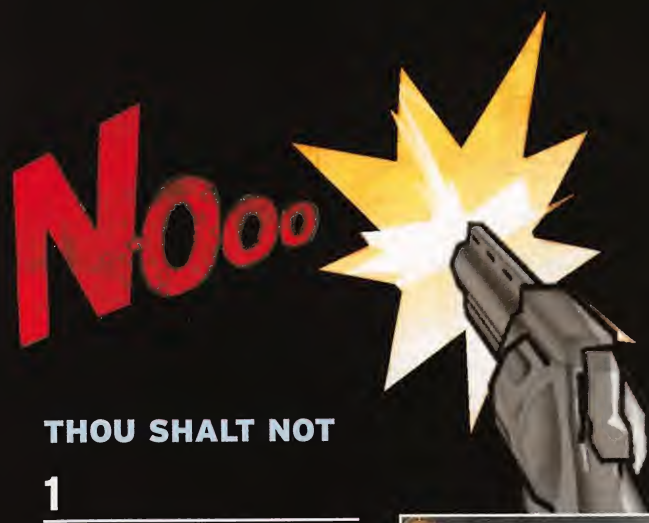
Go out into the global marketplace and take a random sample of games, and odds are the majority of them will be Korean MMORPGs. But then take a random sample of the remaining games, and odds are those will all be firstperson shooters.

Since id Software and others first came up with the brilliant idea of combining the die-cast-plastic-gun antics of arcade smash Operation Wolf with the pseudo-3D madness of 3Demon (remember that one folks? (Er, yes - Decrepit Ed)) our PCs have been clogged with shooter after shooter. The insanity began slowly - at first, most developers were too much in awe of Doom to release a competitor. Titles like Rise of the Triads notwithstanding, the market was lean and the choices few. But Quake changed it all. When id showed the world that 'proper' 3D was possible in a shootin' environment, every half-baked cracker and his venture-capital overlord jumped on the shooter bandwagon, resulting in the piles of cack we here at PCPP have to wade through each month.

For every Call of Duty and Max Payne 2, there are half a dozen Robocops and Fire Warriors. For every Invisible War, there is a Red Faction 2.

Yet the line between sublimity and crapulence is not always so clean and crisp. Take Far Cry for instance. Or Ironstorm. These are, by basic yardsticks, decent shooters. Yet while some cry "bravo!" others condemn them as "brutally average."

We here at PCPP like to think we know our shooters. We like to think we know what needs to go into a shooter to turn it from Psychotoxic into Half-Life 2. Behold then, the 10 Commandments (and counter-Commandments) of Shooter Design.



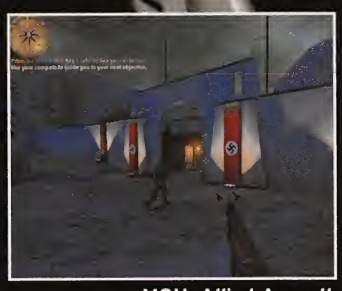
THOU OBVIOUSLY SHALT

1. Use an engine that will look awesome on top end machines...
2. ...but will also scale down to run on more modest machines.
3. Have decent weapon sound effects.
4. Include a female character who is a B or C cup.
5. Position dynamic lights to actually affect gameplay
6. Let the player skip ahead through waffling conversations
7. Present the opportunity to use at least four different vehicles
8. Invent your own catchphrases.
9. Hide a secret DNF jibe somewhere in a sewer level.
10. Let the player fight Hitler in a powersuit, if appropriate.

THOU SHALT NOT

1

Develop a World War 2 shooter. Full stop. Come on guys, we have enough of these damn things already. What's the big attraction? The large scale combat? The crappy guns? Do you like dressing up as Nazis, is that what's going on here? Maybe it's laziness. Maybe, because all the research has already been done, it's simplicity itself to walk into the nearest high school library and check out "World at War" to get all the blueprints for Panzer tanks and the rest of it. Don't do it.



MOH: Allied Assault

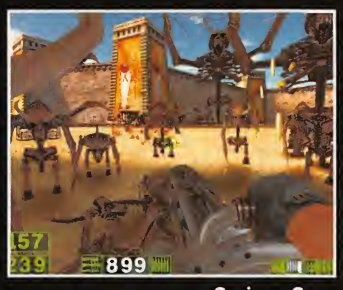
2

Assert that graphics maketh the game. Verily, if we had a dollar for every cutting edge 3D engine with no game attached that we'd reviewed we'd have about... four dollars. But the point is that sure, back in 2001 releasing a game with pixel and vertex shader support and specular highlights on the hero's underpants wowed the kids for hours, but when everything up to and including Fire Warrior has specular highlights now, it's time to get back to the meat of gaming - actual gameplay.

Firewarrior

3

Make the mistake of thinking that Doom was great because it had lots and lots of monsters. Honestly, if Doom had just been about monsters and collecting keycards, then Serious Sam would have been the biggest seller since Half-Life. Bust out your mildewing copy of Doom 2 and take another look. You'll quickly realise that level design, not sheer weight of carnage, carried the game. And thou shalt not think that good level design means exquisitely animated but non-interactive computer consoles stuck to the walls. Unlike the devil, gameplay is not in the niggly small details.



Serious Sam

THOU SHALT

1

Go out and do some research into any of the hundreds of fascinating conflicts that defined warfare in the 20th Century, if you insist on building an historical shooter. And no, Vietnam is not necessarily the only logical next step after WW2. While we're at it, thou shalt bother to think up some kind of contemporary concept for your game that doesn't involve the military. What's wrong with Streets of LA 3D, or Kent State Massacre, or a Charlie's Angels game guys?

No One Lives Forever

2

Try to come up with some kind of gameplay dynamic that involves more than just running through corridors shooting at everything that moves. Sure, still have that part of the game, but think of a shooter as a sandwich. Corridor shooting is the bread and butter of an FPS. You need more meat. Why not add diverging plot paths, actual characters, ingenious puzzles, some kind of RPG-like character development system, anything to take our minds off the mind-numbing experience of clicking the LMB over and over.

System Shock 2

3

Realise that the level, not the individual monster, is the smallest component of successful shooter design. If you have a brilliant and memorable level, then gamers will remember your monsters. Realise too that gamers are probably less interested in levels with beautifully designed tiny details like rubble in the corners, and more interested in levels where flipping a switch lowers entire sections of the ceiling and unleashes a hideous wave of nasties because the player was greedy for some armour or ammo.

DOOM 2

THOU OBVIOUSLY SHALT NOT

1. Make it impossible to skip your crappy cutscenes.
2. Try to control when and where players can save.
3. Allow players to get stuck on geometry.
4. Let the phrase "you need the red key" feature prominently.
5. Include a completely useless grenade launcher.
6. License a crappy 80s sci-fi or war film.
7. Bind the 'r' key to "/cmd rape civilian".
8. Encourage the player to piss on homeless people.
9. Use Nazis at all, unless they are maybe neo-Nazis. In space.
10. Think the Quake3 engine will make up for crap design

THOU SHALT NOT

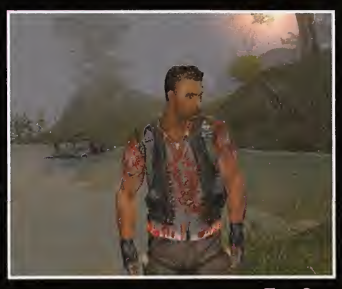
4

Assume you have the writing skills of Ray Bradbury, just because you can program six dynamic 3D coloured lights per scene. You should be made aware that the following plot concepts are what we call "horrible cliches": Mad scientists, monster-ravaged scientific installations, dimensional experiments, mutants, commando raiders, attack helicopters, demons, moonbases, abandoned mining installations, Mars, cyborgs, hellish Nazi genetic experiments, the Secret Experiment Energy Weapon, and World War 2.

DOOM 3

5

Forget that unlike you, the players of your game have not lived within your game world for the past two years. Three paragraphs of barely literate gibberish peppered with lame jokes in the manual will probably not suffice as backstory. Three pre-rendered seconds of a chick in a white swimsuit inexplicably driving a jetski toward an island, at midnight, will probably not give the player sufficient incentive to embark on a 22 hour race against the clock to rescue her. You need to spend time setting the scene.



Far Cry

6

Dismiss the average FPS fanboy as someone who has no time for puzzles and tests of mental acuity. For you, cognitive challenge may begin and end with "you need to find the red key" but for the rest of us, keyhunting is not only passe, it is in fact insulting - we gamers feel that you are deliberately making the level longer and more tedious because you ran out of cool stuff to put in it. When Doom first used the coloured keys, we thought it was cool. But that was ten years ago.

DOOM

THOU SHALT

4

Take your fantastic engine and show it to any of the roughly ten thousand desperate, starving but nonetheless talented science fiction and fantasy authors that pepper the globe. Even the very worst of these will be a better writer than you. Pay the hapless creature his asking price to license his cool alternate universe (usually $2000 plus four months rent) and then build a game world using a published, recognised story that at least a few people already like. At the very least, hire a writer, someone who knows how to write. Don't try and do it yourself.

Clive Barker's Undying

5

Dedicate at least the first hour of gameplay to setting the scene and giving the player some kind of context for the graphic violence and mayhem they are about to unleash on an entire legion of innocent hellbeasts from beyond the black gate. Give the player some reason to actually like your characters, and they will be keen to see what happens to them next. And while we're at it, why not try a little romance? It can't be that difficult - Mills & Boon have been churning out bodice-rippers for decades. In the words of the Black Eyed Peas, where is the love?

Half-life

6

Ensure your puzzles are interesting and complement the environment. The coloured keys may be conceptual death, but there are plenty of other puzzle options available. Strange machines that need to be repaired and then used to access new areas of the level, riddling gargoyles, even item collecting and combining are all basic but much more interesting than just collecting coloured bits of plastic. And if your writer can somehow integrate these puzzle elements into the plot, so much the better.

Tron 2.0

THOU SHALT NOT

7

Think that your game is so fantastic that people will want to play it over and over again just for the sake of it. Unless you can give the player a compelling reason to replay your 3D opus, odds are you'll be superseded by the next big thing two weeks after your title hits the shelves. Adding three different 'difficulty' levels won't solve the problem, especially if 'difficulty' to you means doubling a monster's hit points.

Thief 2: The Metal Age

8

Give in to the compulsion that every section of a game must end with a boss encounter. Boss monsters were invented for early arcade games like R-Type to ensure you died and inserted another 20 cents. Bosses were suitable for Wolfenstein 3D because they included Hitler in a powersuit. And in Doom they were a substitute for a story, and were deployed sparingly anyway. Gigantic, outsized enemies need a damn good reason for suddenly appearing, and shouldn't just be an exceptionally difficult battle to round out a chapter.

Wolfenstein 3D

9

Promise realistic weaponry. No matter how many millions of man-hours you have spent researching the ballistic profile of the Magnum .357, some spotty nerd out in gamerland will know ten times as much about the gun as you, and will decry any niggling differences that your engine has forced you to let creep in. Don't focus on the realistic behaviour of your guns, because some nut somewhere will write a ten-thousand word essay on why they're not realistic. In any case, real guns are too hard to shoot.

Call of Duty

10

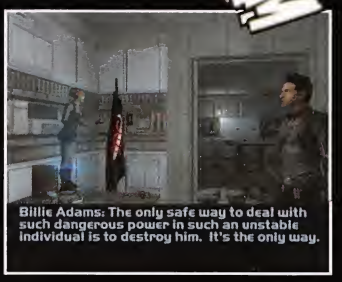
Take too much notice of what gamers say about your game. This seems contradictory, but at some point in the process you have to stick to your guns and insist that you do actually know what you're doing. If you just went on shooter forums and asked kids what they wanted to play, we'd have a thousand identical games on the shelves. Players need to be shown new ways of doing things, so your task as a developer is sometimes to lead, not always to follow. Just make sure you have a damn good intelligent reason for every single one of your design decisions.

Soldier of Fortune

THOU SHALT

7

Give the player real choice. Actually take the time to sit down and plan out at least four different ways of moving through your game world to one of several conclusions. But be careful about how you compel the player to make their choices - if, like Invisible War, you make every faction or option vaguely distasteful, the average gamer will probably think your game sucks, and fail to realise that you are offering real choice.



Deus Ex: invisible War

8

Use boss monsters intelligently. I mean, if you've made this awesome massive 3D model and you just HAVE to use it, and there's a good plot reason for it to appear in an abandoned subway station, please don't make it just another monster with 10,000 hit points. Take a leaf from Half-Life's book and make the bosses impossible to kill with conventional weapons, so the player has to figure out some devilishly MacGyveresque inventive way of doing away with the hideous monstrosity.

Half-life

9

Attempt to bust the paradigm of weapon design. Picking up ammo, reloading, zoom sights, wobbly crosshairs, these are all cliches we've played with a hundred times before. Why not try something new? The modular weapon system where the default gun is slowly upgraded seems to have died in the arse, as the saying goes, but there are still more options. At the very least, get rid of reloading. Pushing a button every thirty seconds, is this what makes for 'realistic' gameplay?

Halo

10

Be prepared to defend and demonstrate why your game works despite being crazily different from the mind-numbing corporate pap that clogs the shelves. Don't just roll over as soon as some kid complains about your unified ammo system. Don't blither on about schedule delays and bug problems when some other kid whines that feature x was/wasn't included/included as expected. It's your game. If you can explain why a feature works in a hundred words or less, it's probably a good feature. Be proud of it.

Deus Ex: invisible War

UNDER THE HOOD

ROME: TOTAL WAR

The Total War series, in its Shogun and Medieval incarnations, has firmly established itself as our favourite game of strategic exploration and conquest. Ever since Activision announced its plans to expand into Rome, we've been as excited as a Spartan in the public baths. There's no doubt Rome looks spectacular. Though one question has dogged our thoughts: just how has The Creative Assembly managed to do it? Let's find out...

Welcome to Under The Hood, where we look at the technology that drives the blockbuster games that we play, as well as the games we're getting excited about. In other words, we're going to be digging up the dirt on the major game engines with detailed explanations of the game engine feature sets direct from the people involved in the creation of these engines.

This month we spoke with Mike Simpson, Development Director at The Creative Assembly, about the technology underpinning Rome: Total War...

At a glance, it's obvious that the Rome engine is quite different to other 3D strategy game engines currently on the market. Is Rome's defining characteristic its visual output, or does the innovation go deeper? What is it about the engine that makes it stand out from the crowd?
The display part of the engine deals with hundreds of times the number of characters of other RTS games. It also has to cope with a very wide range of system specs – it has to run smoothly on the min spec 1Ghz machine, and fully exploit the capabilities of machines and cards that haven't even been designed yet - so speed and scalability are major features of the engine. We've probably taken both of them further than any PC product has gone before.

Is Rome just another logical step forward, as Medieval was from Shogun, or is the engine more of a quantum leap in technology? What hardware has become available that has made the new features possible?
The engine is all new. We started work on it at the same time we started Medieval Total War, with the firm intention of it being us that beats MTW rather than the competition. So, it's a huge jump forwards. I guess hardware T&L cards make a big difference, but you don't strictly speaking need one. A fast processor with a non T&L card will do.

Most of the excitement surrounding the engine is focused on the polygonal units. Does Rome have a fundamentally different methodology of generating these models that allows you to use hundreds or even thousands at once? Does the engine differ significantly from traditional 3D engines in this regard, and how?
I'd hate to give any hope to any other developers thinking about going down this route. They'll have to figure it out for themselves.

How do the models interact with the terrain model, and how does this differ from the way the 2D models of the previous Total War games moved through the game world?
The interactions are pretty much what you'd expect in the real world. Having battles in cities does make the collision checking a little more difficult, but the really clever bits are in the path-finding. Most RTS games with just 20 units have trouble guaranteeing not to get stuck, but we have to deal with thousands in a maze of city streets.

What order does the engine render the objects in the game world? Is everything built up from the terrain or is there a different order? How does this assist in game performance?
Again, while I'd love to tell you, I really don't want to give too many clues as to how it's all done.

How far can the player 'see' in the game world? Is this distance a limitation of the engine, or is the engine now at a point where you can 'set' the horizon wherever you like? What is the maximum view distance, and how has this improved from previous Total War games?
You do ask awkward questions! The battles are played in a 2km across "playable area" with another 16km of "outfield" surrounding it. So from one corner of the playable area along the diagonal you could see 24.46km. In fact the limiting factor is a visual quality one – to make a the landscape scale feel right you have to have a certain minimum amount of haze. With that minimum amount the distant mountains start to disappear completely at anything much more than 25km. In the real world something strange happens with haze – you can be looking at a tree 20m away that is noticeably fogged, but still clearly see hills 30km away. It's very non-linear, and the card manufacturers don't quite give us enough control to exactly duplicate it. That's probably more info than you were looking for... MTW battlefields were a couple of kms across, with an "edge of the world" that was annoyingly visible at times. You won't ever see the edge of the world in RTW.

Something we've always wanted to know - how does sky actually work? How high is the sky, or is there really no 'lid' on the gameworld and is it all a visual trick? What shape is the Rome universe - cubic, spherical, cylindrical etc - and what fundamental effect does this have on the way the engine works?
Again, while I'd love to tell you, I really don't want to give too many clues as to how it's all done.

What was the programming breakthrough that allowed the use of polygonal units instead of 2D?
There wasn't one individual breakthrough. We set off with a heap of problems in front of us and an assumption that they were all solvable. We innovated, prototyped, and optimised in ever tightening cycles until it was all done. In fact we're still coming up with new ones now.

How does the way units interact with buildings differ from their interaction with terrain? Can units pass through doors and climb steps, for instance? Was this a particularly challenging programming task, or is it just a logical extension of the way units move on terrain?
Units have to be able to get up to and down from walls, climb ladders, hide in buildings and so on. As we were starting from scratch with a new engine, the whole thing was structured to be flexible and extendable. Once the framework is solid you can divide and conquer individual issues.

How does the engine optimise performance when units are viewed from a distance? Are the models scaled back in complexity or do you use a different technique?
Again, while I'd love to tell you, I really don't want to give too many clues... (*Snip! - Ed.*)

What stage of rendering a scene requires the most processing power? Is there a bottleneck, and if so what tricks have you used to limit its effects?
In an optimal rendering engine all the potential bottlenecks are equally loaded. So there is no bottleneck.

What are the different detail options available and how exactly do they improve performance on slower systems? Are there tweaks available beyond just changing graphical detail?
Apart from the various ways the graphical detail is scaled, we also allow the user to scale the default unit size. This means on a low end system a unit of legionaries might be 40 men. On a top end system it might be 160 men. So, broadly speaking the min spec can be considerably less than the speed of a top end machine. Even with 40 man units you still potentially have thousands of men on the battlefield, and it doesn't affect gameplay.

With the inclusion of cities and street-to-street fighting, has the RTW engine become two separate engines that switch depending on the viewpoint of the player, such as Descent 3's indoor/outdoor rendering switch? Or are the cities and open terrain all part of the one engine?
No, it's all one environment.

How does the engine maintain a clear view of the action when fighting in cities? Especially if an army is evenly distributed through a complex city, how does the engine determine which buildings should be transparent? How much control will the player have over this?
We don't transparent out the buildings, and so far no-one has had a problem with this. I think the camera angle and the way unit banners are always visible deals with it.

How heavily does the engine rely on visual cues for gameplay, versus the importance of sound? Is sound just 'trimming' or are there important tactical implications of how the sound is processed?
We're working in quite a lot of subtle information in to the sound. Maybe most people won't notice - it will just sound right. But that's ok.

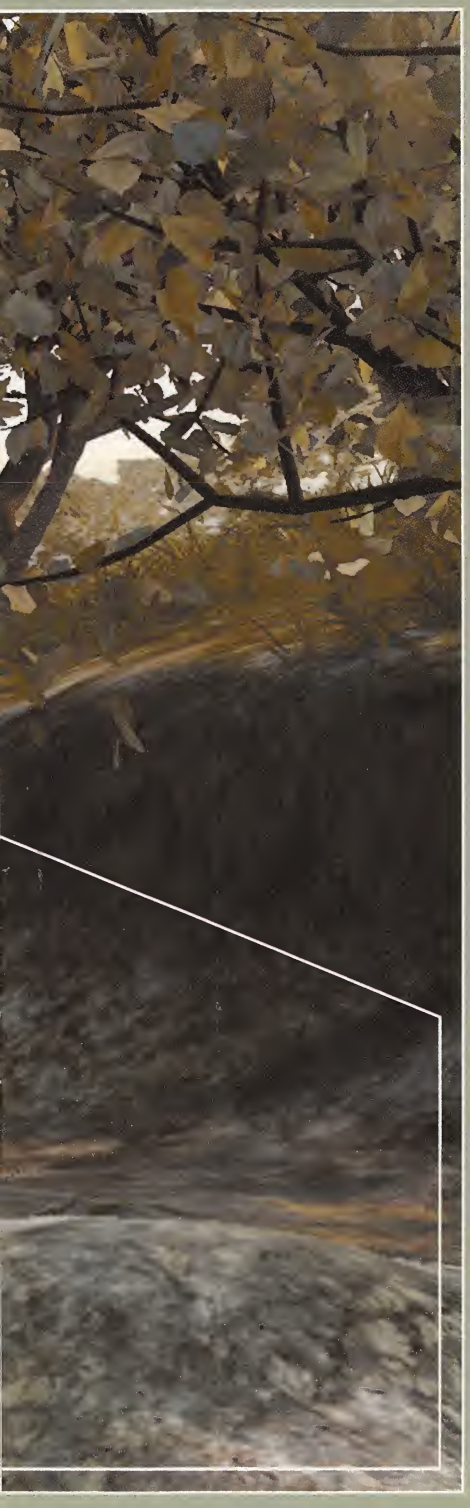
How does the engine prioritise sound from hundreds of different units to provide a mix that provides meaningful audio cues to the player?
It uses a fairly complex priority system based on importance of the sound, size of the sound and distance to it.

How does the engine determine when to have units act as part of a group and when to act as individuals? Do units have individual AI, and if not, how does the engine 'simulate' individual behaviour in routes, retreats, panics etc?
The whole TW system is based on simulating the individual. Each man knows his unit orders (you can hear the unit leader shout them out), and can see what's going on immediately around him. If you simulate each individual, the unit will behave like a unit, and the army will behave like an army. Emergent behaviour. This part is probably more of an achievement than the rendering engine. Individual AI for 10,000+ men.

Individual AI for 10,000+ men - that's probably more of an achievement than the rendering engine

How do special effects such as smoke and fire affect gameplay? Are they merely visual effects, or does the AI and the rendering engine make changes to create meaningful effects such as reduced accuracy through smoke, etc?
Smoke and fire are part of making the world real. Visual effects, but not merely visual effects. It would not look right without them.

How is today's technology limiting your vision for the game? If you had an ideal rendering and processing environment, what would it be? What element do you most regret having to leave out of the game?
It's not the technology that limits what we can do - it's time and effort. The rendering environment will continue to double in power every 18 months, so in 6 years time we'll be able to do half a million men photo-realistically. Nice, but it's not how big your rendering pipe is it's what you do with it. TW has never been about rendering engines - the clever stuff is all in the gameplay. That's what we win awards for. I've no huge regrets over leaving anything out of this game - the game is crammed full already, and it can all wait for the next one.



IT'S COOL TO BE SMOOTH

Ah, the joys of AA. No, not Alcoholics Anonymous (for all you beer-fuelled LAN animals out there), but anti-aliasing – a delight to the eyes and a little investigated feature of computer graphics. **James Bannan** takes a closer look.

AA Theory

What exactly is anti-aliasing? Basically, it's a technique used to smooth the edges of screen graphics. As you know, a screen is made up of pixels which are essentially solid, square blocks of colour, so in order to create a diagonal or curved line, blocks must be arranged in such a way that follows the general shape of the curve desired. However, due to the blocky nature of pixels, this results in a curve with a jagged edge, which isn't particularly visually appealing. It's especially noticeable when a straight line is drawn on the screen at a slight angle, producing a "stepladder" effect. This is where AA steps in. It examines pixels along the edge and compares the absolute colour of the shape with the jagged curve (like a circle) with the colour of the background, and calculates which RGB (colour) value would be most prevalent in that pixel were the curve a perfect one. It then colours the pixel in that colour, so that it becomes an intermediary between the foreground and background, and so on down with each pixel along the curve. When viewed up close, the result is actually quite blurry and not definite at all, but zoom out to a normal viewing distance from the screen and the curve looks crisp and clean, with no jaggedness.

So basically, anti-aliasing is a visual illusion, making blocky curves nice and smooth to human eyes. And we like it!

AA Gaming

Why bother with anti-aliasing in computer games? Well, it looks better. Textures and shapes have a more solid, realistic feel to them, which stands up to close scrutiny. That's about it, really, but games with AA enabled look a LOT better than games without, and an enhanced experience is really what it's all about, isn't it? Luckily, ATI and NVIDIA are of the same opinion, and have devoted lots of time and effort into making sure their cards and drivers are fully AA-enabled and efficient as possible, doing their best to overcome the pressures which enabling AA places on your graphics card. How they do it varies, however, so let's take a look under the hood.

Anti-aliasing effects implemented by graphics card manufacturers are somewhat more complex than simply blurring jagged edges. They use a variety of image sampling and re-sampling methods to achieve improved image quality – these methods come in different intensity levels with a

■ 1.1 NO ANTI-ALIASING

■ 1.2 8X NVIDIA ANTI-ALIASING

varying corresponding hit on card performance. The trick is, as ever, finding the balance which suits your system best.

Super-sampling is one methodused. This involves rendering the original image at a much higher resolution in the card's memory buffer. This larger image is then resampled and filtered back down to the original resolution, but each pixel in the original image is re-created using colour and texture information from however many pixels were sampled from the original pixel in the larger image.

For example, an image at 800x600 with 4x super-sampling AA will be resized to 1600x1200 (4 times as many pixels than the original, which corresponds to four pixels in the new image for every one pixel in the old image). When the larger image is resized back down to 800x600, each pixel will be rendered using edge and texture information from four pixels. This AA method is very effective, but is generally considered to be the "brute-force" approach to AA, as it simply pushes through large amounts of pixel information to produce the end result. The performance hit on graphics cards can also be considerable – using 4x AA effectively pushes four times as many frames through the memory buffer.

Multi-sampling is the second technique, and this can be done in two different ways. The first re-samples the original image a number of times, and then overlays each sample over the original image, offsetting each image by less than half a pixel. This gives a motion blur effect which is smoothed by blending the offset images together, and each image requires its own space in the memory buffer – similar to super-sampling.

The second method is similar to the first, except that the texture information taken from the first sample is used as the texture information for every sample thereafter. This means that less information is pushed through the memory buffer, resulting in

■ 2.1 NVIDIA NO ANTI-ALIASING ■ 2.2 8X NVIDIA ANTI-ALIASING

increased performance, but this method tends to improve the edges rather than both edges and textures. The resulting image is thus of a slightly lower quality when compared with super-sampling AA, but it leaves much greater GPU resources free to tackle texture AA. It's also MUCH better at smoothing out edges than the other two approaches. The only drawback is that it's quite complex, so it needs a fairly late-model GPU to handle the calculations – NVIDIA made this kind of multi-sampling available in their GeForce4 range and above.

For each of these methods, there are particular approaches which can be used. When an image is sampled and re-sampled, it is done according to a particular pattern algorithm. The algorithms used vary between chip manufacturers, but the basic logic it's based upon is the same. When the image is re-sampled, each pixel is re-sampled using an average of the colour information of the surrounding pixels. Where these sampled pixels lie is at the core of the algorithm. For example, four pixels might be sampled in a box pattern surrounding the original pixel – one at each corner. This is quite a common algorithm (known as ordered-grid), but it has its drawbacks, which are principally based on the fact that the human eye is very much attuned to linear patterns – squares, rectangles and so on – and any discrepancy in an anti-aliased picture done using a linear algorithm is easily picked up, and looks worse as a result.

This has been addressed by the use of rotational and offset algorithms, where the sampled pixels lie in a rotated or skewed pattern from the original pixel. The eye can't pick up the pattern as easily, and the result is much smoother and visually pleasing. The only drawback is that this method relies on a larger number of sampled pixels to be truly effective, and this generally results in a greater performance hit on the card.

Take a look at these screenshots from Legacy of Kain – Defiance. We looked at the same screen using increasing AA levels on both NVIDIA FX and ATI RADEON cards. From a normal viewing perspective, there doesn't appear to be a huge amount of difference in the quality of the images. Part of this is that the game's dark, gothic feeling is achieved with very little contrast between different colours, so the blending is already pretty good. However, if you look at the blade of Kain's sword, you can make out a jaggedness in the curve which is not there in the 8xAA image. Image 1.1 has no AA enabled, while image 1.2 is 8X AA.

The algorithms used vary between chip manufacturers, but the basic logic it's based upon is the same

■ 3.1 ATI 2X ANTI ALIASING ■ 3.2 NVIDIA 2X ANTI ALIASING

Zooming right up close (400%), the difference becomes much clearer. Looking at the folds in Kain's hair, the shoulder muscles, the curved blade and skull on the sword, and the details in the cloak, the close-up quality of 8x AA (Image 2.2) is far superior compared to the shot without AA (Image 2.1).

The game has an AA option within its graphics menus, and turning this on without turning on AA at the driver did produce a better quality image, but it was something in the range of 2x AA. For the dramatic improvements, you need to let the driver handle AA. Of note, the performance hit at 8x was considerable, and the game was noticeably slower.

Bear in mind that no matter what kind of AA you use, as your resolution and AA settings increase, your card will be placed under more pressure, with more of the memory buffer being used. Don't even think about using AA unless you have 128MB of VRAM on your card, and for the higher settings you should really be looking at having 256MB, otherwise your card will become your gaming bottleneck, and that's just embarrassing. In fact, the amount of RAM your video card has will determine what levels of AA are available to you at different resolutions – if there's not enough you might not be able to choose the setting you prefer. Bear in mind also that GPU architecture and memory bandwidth have as much to do with AA availability and

■ 4.1 ATI 6X ANTI ALIASING ■ 4.2 NVIDIA 8X ANTI ALIASING

performance as does physical RAM. AA is an area where subtlety and finesse wins out over sheer power.

AA according to ATI

ATI uses a custom implementation of AA called Smoothvision (a trademarked process). It's a combination of super-sampled AA and anisotropic filtering for textures. The majority of Smoothvision's AA settings use multi-sampling AA with a rotated grid layout, and the higher-end ones use an offset pattern in addition to the rotated grid. This tends to result in very good AA even at quite low levels, where the impact on the card is minimal, so games running on ATI tend to be able to implement modest amounts of AA without dropping many frames during gameplay.

To enable AA, quit your game, right-click on your desktop and go into Properties (Please note that this procedure is for ATI's Catalyst drivers). This will open the Display Properties window – click on the Settings tab, then the Advanced tab. Click on the 3D tab, make sure the radio button for "Direct3D" is selected, click the "Use custom settings" checkbox, and then select the Custom button. In the Smoothvision section of the Direct3D window, untick "Application preference", and then use the slider to select the level of AA you want. You can do the same for OpenGL applications; simply make sure the radio button for OpenGL is checked in the 3D tab.

AA according to NVIDIA

NVIDIA's AA implementation is called Accuview, which is embedded into the nView driver system, and also uses anisotropic filtering for textures. NVIDIA offers many more AA settings than ATI – the lower-end settings use standard super-sampled, ordered-grid AA (which is kind of a waste of time), and the higher-end settings use either multi-sampled rotated grids, or hybrid super-/multi-sampled AA, with either ordered or partially rotated grid patterns. A chunk of these settings are only available with Direct3D support.

To enable AA in nView, close any games and right-click on the desktop. Select Properties to open the Display Properties window, click on Settings and Advanced. There should be a tab with the name of your GeForce card (GeForce FX 5600 for example) – click on this and select "Performance & Quality" from the slide-out menu on the left. Under "antialiasing settings", uncheck the "Application-controlled" checkbox, and then use the slider to select the AA level you want.

Who does it better?

Although ATI is generally considered to be the better choice for AA enthusiasts, the truth is that the battle for AA supremacy is a continuous one, and neither ATI or NVIDIA really have a clear advantage. Performance tests are subjective and open to multiple interpretations, and the results also vary greatly depending on which tests/games/settings are used. What complicates matters further is that neither the ATI nor NVIDIA AA settings are directly comparable – they use different methods and algorithms at each level, with different performance hits and differing levels of image quality. Having said that, there are features which can be examined to try and determine relative comparisons.

At the lower end of the AA range, the ATI 2x and 4x settings make immediate use of rotated-grid multi-sampling. As already mentioned, these settings tend to result in an immediate improvement in picture quality with minimal impact. The NVIDIA 2x setting uses the same AA methods, so at low levels there's really not much separating them in terms of performance, but the rotated grid method definitely looks better – take a look at the 2x comparisons from Legacy of Kain - Defiance, seen in image 3.1 (ATI 2X) and 3.2 (NVIDIA 2X).

At higher levels, the difference becomes a little more apparent, but again it varies depending on the situation. ATI sticks to the principle of smart multi-sampling and rotated grid patterns all the way through its high-end settings, whereas NVIDIA gets stuck into hybrids between the two. On some games, this puts a large amount of pressure on the GPU, resulting in a sudden marked drop in frame rates, while ATI demonstrates a more consistent decline in performance at higher AA levels, setting it well above NVIDIA.

■ ATI NO ANTI ALIASING ■ ATI 2X ANTI ALIASING ■ ATI 4X ANTI ALIASING ■ ATI 6X ANTI ALIASING

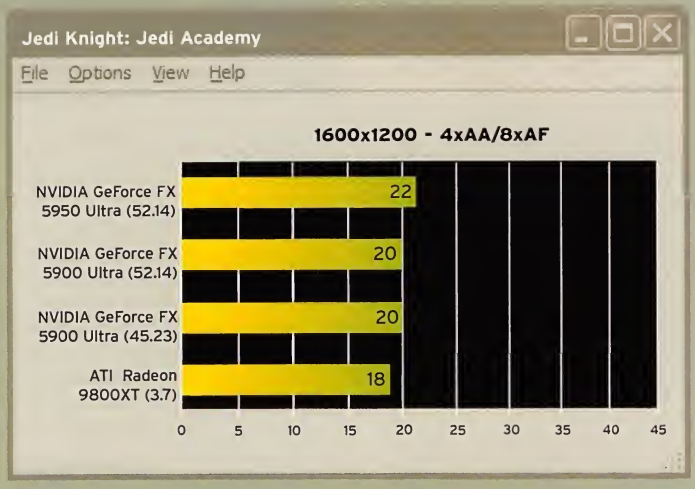
Having said that, NVIDIA's methods certainly get results – look at the screenshots again. Image 4.1 shows the ATI card at 6X while image 4.2 is the NVIDIA card at 8X. Unfortunately the RADEON doesn't offer an 8x setting, so perhaps the comparison is a little unfair, but the difference in quality is far greater than a simple jump from 6x to 8x would suggest.

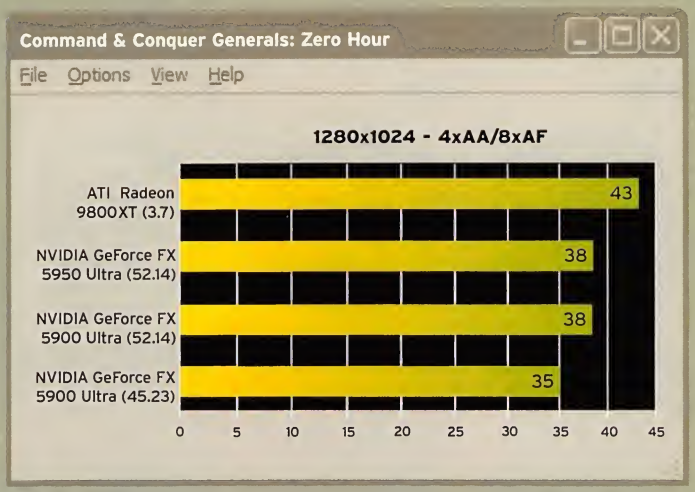
However, this behaviour is not totally consistent. Take a look at the benchmarks we performed, some games prefer NVIDIA's AA implementation, while others prefer ATI's. Another thing which is visible on the benchmarks is that the NVIDIA cards perform MUCH better on the latest driver versions.

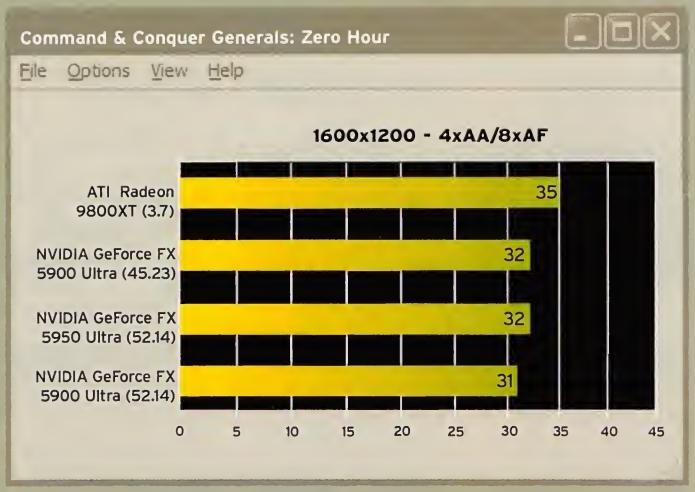
Really, it comes down to personal preference. If you like AA, and want to use it, then at the lower levels it doesn't matter which card you go for – both implementations work equally well. At the higher levels, ATI seems to offer a consistent balance of performance and quality, while NVIDIA tends to fall away – not consistently, but enough to be of concern – and the choice can really come down to which games you play, and which hardware platform they respond best to.

At the end of the day, if quality of gaming is your priority, anti-aliasing is certainly something to look at, and to play with to find your optimal balance between looks and speed – it looks great and will certainly enhance the gaming experience. If your primary focus is performance, then AA is perhaps something of a luxury, diverting critical GPU resources away from that hot FPS rate. In the future it's likely that AA will become the norm, having little to no impact on performance as a result of hardware design – in fact, on the high end cards of today there is already a very low performance hit when low levels of AA are activated. Regardless of which technique is used, those who have used AA find it hard to go back to the jaggies of an aliased scene, while those who have never seen AA in action should do themselves a favour and investigate further.

On the high end cards of today there is already a very low performance hit when low levels of AA are activated







GAMES IN REVIEW

So, Far Cry, eh? Before playing Ubisoft's partially sun-drenched shooter, I'd suggest closing that book about game design theory, removing www.gamasutra.com from your Favorites (sic) folder and momentarily forgetting those aspirations of writing an honours thesis on ludology.

Far Cry is, as Anthony writes, a shooter. It's not the tropical archipelago of freeform, seat-of-your-pants, emergent gameplay with guns and jeeps and hang gliders some – maybe many – of us had, perhaps mistakenly, been expecting. Approach it as such and you'll be sorely and inevitably disappointed.

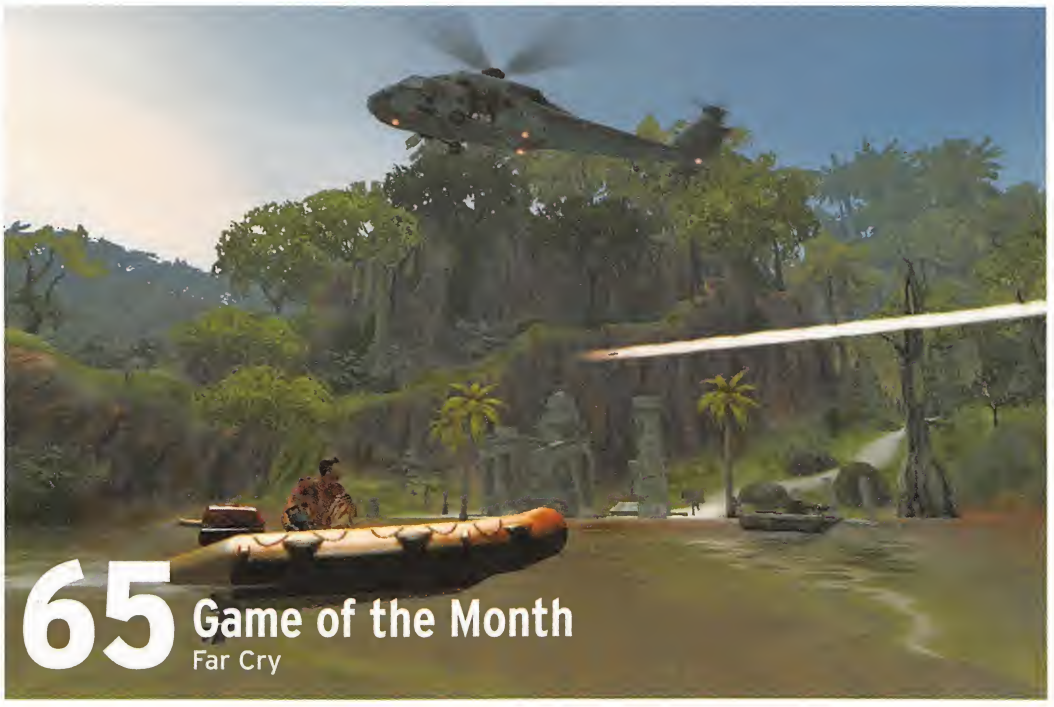
It's difficult – churlish, even – to criticise Far Cry in any conventional sense so little does developer Crytek seem occupied by notions of innovation, polish, pacing, aesthetics, or…

It isn't Deus Ex with a nice tan. Or Stalker on a summer vacation. It's a shooter, the very definition of. My paradigm remained resolutely unshifted.

If Far Cry were a movie – and of course the rights to such a thing have been seized by our friend Uwe Boll – it would star some C-grade brute with no charisma (or Jean-Claude Van Damme - whomever wanted less money) and indulge in the kind of breath-taking stupidity that has seen Steven Seagal laughing all the way to the bank. The monosyllabic script, what little of it there is, would begin incoherent and rapidly slide into nonsense. The characterisation would… wait, let's see… oh, of course, there is none. But the CG action, the explosions, the boat, car and copter chases, the one-man-against-many shootouts and the human-versus-mutant brawls? They'd be something else. Worth the price of admission, easy.

Crytek has designed a game to be enjoyed, first and foremost. And is has succeeded – certainly we've all had a blast playing it these past few weeks. Though I can't help but think it's also the sort of game you'd feel somewhat embarrassed about including on any personal best of… list. But, ultimately, does that actually matter?

David Wildgoose
Editor



65 Game of the Month
Far Cry

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GOLD AWARD	HIGH DISTINCTION	DISTINCTION	CREDIT	PASS	FAIL
The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new direction in gaming, a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one. It is gaming. You must own it.	This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.	An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost - but not quite - an essential purchase.	Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.	A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial.	There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen.
90+	**85-100**	**75-84**	**65-74**	**50-64**	**0-49**

The hawaiian shirt - pure gameplay gold

PC PowerPlay GOLD AWARD

Far Cry

Because the jungle has eyes people, don't forget!

Developer: Crytek ■ **Publisher:** Ubi Soft ■ **Distributor:** Ubi Soft ■ **Price:** $89.95 ■ **Rating:** MA15+ ■ **Available:** Now

You need to be careful when you start to play Far Cry. Crytek has trod the finest of lines when it comes to creative embellishment of what their game can actually do. Some folks would have read the various Far Cry previews in this and other magazines, and perhaps come to the conclusion that the game is more Operation Flashpoint than Half-Life. That Far Cry teaches a thing or two to Invisible War about freeform gaming.

Nope. Read those previews again. You'll see in fact that Crytek never explicitly said Far Cry would be anything more than a straight-up shooter. Sure, the developer seemed more than happy for people to run around with the impression that the game would break new frontiers in immersion and gameplay dynamics, but Crytek never promised that themselves.

What I'm saying here is that you need to be aware, before you drop your $100 on this thing, that Far Cry is a shooter. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less. However, unlike Max Payne 2, XIII and (obviously) Firewarrior, Far Cry is undeniably a very good shooter.

Many people mistake the leanness of shooter gameplay for simplicity. They think programming a shooter must be the easiest thing in the world: grab a decent engine, make up some levels, put in a few guns, and voila. This is in fact wrong. Doom is the best example of this: many subtleties combine within the structure of the game to make a seemingly simple time-waster rich and compelling. A modular level design allowed id to keep the challenges in the game fresh and interesting, even after many hours play.

Now, Far Cry is no Doom. It suffers from the curse of modernity: Crytek feels that the movie paradigm is the only one worthy of its impressive engine. Like Half-Life, Far Cry tries to fool you into thinking you're living a story rather than playing a game by minimising the interface, keeping load screens few and far between and providing audio rather than written mission briefings.

Unlike Half-Life, however, Far Cry does not make particularly heavy use of flashy and impressive scripted sequences. There are some Half-Life like moments when hapless mercenaries are dragged off by hideous mutants, but far too few. Half-Life flavoured the repetitive nature of runnin' and gunnin' with memorable moments. Far Cry is a plainer, simpler dish by far.

Yet, to stretch this metaphor even further, let's not forget that there are folks out there who prefer meat and three veg to a sixteen course banquet of nouveau-cuisine. Scripted sequences run the risk of making a game feel like it's on rails. Far Cry is most definitely not on rails. Some kind of mechanical grid with only four directions of movement, perhaps, but definitely not rails.

Time for some context, then. Far Cry follows the misadventures of the hero guy, who while out cruising on his expensive yacht and wearing his favourite red Hawaiian shirt, finds himself hurled into the cruel sea by a

THE SHIRT

The central conceit of Far Cry seems to be the hero guy's shirt. It's a red Hawaiian shirt, you see, and right from the get-go, his mysterious benefactor recommends he strap on some body armour to hide the garish pattern. Oddly enough, despite gunning down uncountable dozens of mercenaries who are about the same size and build as him, hero guy never thinks to ditch the shirt altogether and grab something a little less outlandish. Perhaps he's squeamish about blood. In any case, the shirt allows for a few amusing moments. "Hey you in the shirt!" the mercs will shout, seconds before unleashing a hail of lead.

SYSTEM

NEED
P4-1GHz+
256MB RAM
64MB Video card
1GB HDD

WANT
P4 3GHz+
1GB RAM
Radeon 9800
1GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER
32 players

ONLINE
www.babygotosleep.com
Apparently "no one equals our experience and success in helping children stop crying and go to sleep - since 1985!" What about before 1985 huh? Huh?

titanic explosion. Earlier that evening, a chick in a white swimsuit had inexplicably hopped on a jetski and sped away from the yacht. Perhaps she planted the bomb. Perhaps not, since she turns out to be Val, the hero guy's best girl.

The hero guy quickly swims ashore and finds himself set upon by horrible mercenaries in horrible hats. He exacts preliminary revenge with a pistol and a machete, and then finds a handy video mobile phone, which immediately rings. A mysterious benefactor then proceeds to guide the hero guy through a series of missions. He's trapped on an island, run by the evil guy, who has been doing genetic experiments on monkeys. Horrible mutants then escape from their holding pens and the gunfight is on.

Presumably this plot is given a little more flesh in the manual, which hadn't been printed when we got our review code. It's no Fall of Black Mesa, sure, but a shooter needs not do much more than just give the player some kind of license to brutally murder hundreds of armed men and dozens of poor, traumatised mutant monkeys.

There is one immediate problem with the plot however. It's very nature - mercenaries versus mutant monkeys - means there's not much variety in opponents. Some monkeys are bigger than others. As for the humans, some mercenaries wear helmets and armour, others only casual dress.

As for the humans, some mercenaries wear helmets and armour, others only casual dress

The AI is competent but nothing spectacular. Once again we learn another lesson from the past: the cool thing isn't that a game's AI is able to make incredibly complex decisions, but rather that the AI has to APPEAR to be making complex decisions. Half-Life's marines were fantastic in this respect. Far Cry's mercs seem about as smart - they try and flank you, they use grenades, they fall back and run and get buddies - but since many areas are so open and expansive, there's little opportunity for the player to actually see these behaviours, and their impact is minimised by the geography.

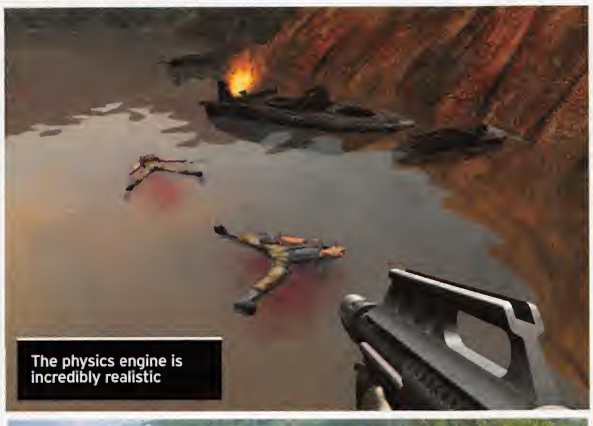
Which brings us rather neatly to the much-hyped engine. Is Far Cry the best looking game in the history of PC gaming? Well, not really. (*I beg to differ - Bennett*) An engine can throw around all the polygons, specular highlights and dynamic lighting it likes, but if the actual art is ugly to begin with, the tech will always be let down.

Far Cry looks good, but it should look better. The plants are highly detailed, but the leaves are just the wrong shade of lurid fluoro green. The dusk and night missions look better, although the dynamic lighting is once again way underused. The engine is capable of having campfires cast huge flickering shadows on cliffs, but Crytek hasn't taken advantage of this. They've employed every graphical trick in the book to such an extent that your PC will probably be

WAXFACE MANSWEAT

As mentioned in the main text, the graphics in Far Cry are technically accomplished but artistically suspect. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the character models. Most mercs you won't get a good look at because you'll gun 'em down quick smart, but a few of the cutscenes show the character model to unfortunate effect. Apart from having a really bad case of facial paralysis, the hero guy also seems to have the sweats in a disturbingly creepy way. A bottom-of-the-rung porno creepy way. Also, while his manly jowls are kind of the colour you'd expect, his forehead is an unpleasant shade of green. Then again, perhaps gunning down a hundred armed men without mercy has that kind of effect on a man.

Don't these mercs ever cut the grass?



The physics engine is incredibly realistic

MULTIPLAYER

Far Cry's focus is on singleplayer and going "wow" at the engine, but there is still a meaty enough multiplayer mode thoughtfully included. There is the usual slew of options, such as deathmatch, most of which probably won't be played much. However, Assault mode looks rather more promising. Two teams must either assault or defend up to three objectives on a map. The expansive outdoor areas make this quite effective. One interesting addition for multiplayer is "sparkling" sights on zoomed weapons. This means a little twinkle of light flashes continually every time you look through your sniper rifle. Without it, multiplayer would degenerate into a bunch of guys hiding in the bushes trying to get a shot off against another bunch of guys hiding in the bushes.

smoking by the time you've finished the game, yet few of these tricks have been used with any artistic flair.

Some items in the game look quite average - the WW2 carrier at the beginning is little more than a giant rusty polygon. There are also a surprisingly large number of flat 2D sprites used instead of real 3D objects. Some fences, vines and other minutiae are little more than cardboard cutouts, and seem designed to only be viewed at a distance. Hardly a major fault, sure, but they seem incongruous in a game that has graphical superiority as one of its major selling points.

Of course, most of us will be playing Far Cry with many of the cleverer flashy bits turned off, because the system requirements to run this thing at full detail are pretty insane. Therefore, Far Cry has to survive out among the masses on gameplay alone. How does it fare?

Pretty well, in fact. It's easily better than many of the other pure shooters we currently have on our shelves, such as XIII and Max Payne 2. It won't be setting new standards for the genre, but by the same token it rarely puts a foot wrong.

It no longer seems the done thing to let the player carry all the weapons in the game at once any more, so Far Cry only lets you carry four. Typically, you'll hang on to one or two of the SMGs since ammo from killed baddies is plentiful. Same deal with the familiar Jackhammer combat shotgun. More powerful weapons such as the rocket launcher and the sniper rifle will be regularly swapped out as the situation changes. Don't worry though - the game helpfully provides nearby weapon caches for segments where either weapon is "compulsory fun".

The pace of the game rests somewhere between the frantic "yaaaargh!" of Doom and the more thoughtful picking of Ghost Recon. You can charge into enemy camps as long as you have a steady aim and plenty of ammo. Otherwise, it might be worth your while taking a look at the lie of the land and finding an overlooking ridge to snipe from to even the odds a little.

The game chops and changes between indoor and outdoor levels, with the former fairly typical of the genre. Keycards and switches also occasionally make an appearance, though their implementation feels disappointingly cursory - the correct door for the keycard is usually a few metres around the corner from where you found it .

We've come to expect vehicles in our shooters, and Far Cry delivers on cue. The vehicles act sort of like armour - each Humvee has a limited number of hitpoints. Fortunately, there is usually another Humvee parked by the side of the road about a hundred metres up in those sections of the game where vehicles are required to progress.

At the end of the day, the only real way to punish Far Cry is for not being particularly innovative. It has an excellent engine, compelling enough gameplay, good weapon balance, vehicles, indoor and outdoor levels, a dumb but palatable story and a few neat twists and turns. There's even the occasional bit that can be said to be really cool.

Basically, Far Cry is like a big icy glass of beer or coke at the end of a hard day's work. You know you shouldn't depend on it so much, and love it so dearly, but somehow, because it's everything you expect and nothing you don't, you just can't help it.

Anthony Fordham

RATING

FOR

Duh, graphics
Crackin' pace
Guns guns guns!

AGAINST

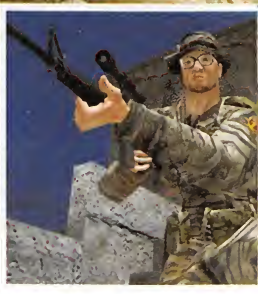
Character model
Moronic story
Val

OVERALL

An almost perfect example of what a 'pure shooter' should be

90

Battlefield Vietnam



War! Huh! What is it good for! Erm, a basis for multiplayer computer games?

Developer: DICE ■ **Publisher:** Electronic Arts ■ **Distributor:** Electronic Arts ■ **Price:** $89.95 ■ **Rating:** M15+ ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
933MHz CPU
256MB RAM
64MB Geforce3
1.5GB HDD

WANT
2GHz CPU
1GB RAM
GeForceFX 5800 or better
Broadband Internet connection

MULTIPLAYER
Yes – 64 player

ONLINE
vietnam.vassar.edu/
It's easy to forget that this was a real conflict in which millions of people died, rather than just a game. This site has a relatively unbiased view of the conflict.

Including the ability to mod your game can be a tricky decision at best. On the one hand it can help to boost game sales out of sight – just check out Half Life and the mod Counter-Strike for proof. Even the original Battlefield 1942 probably wouldn't have done so well if it wasn't for the Desert Combat mod.

But on the other hand it can hurt the developer's attempts for a game sequel, as the new product must pummel every mod for the original game into the ground. It's this very problem that faces Battlefield Vietnam thanks to the beautifully crafted Eve of Destruction, a free mod for BF1942.

Both BFV and EoD bring the combat of the Battlefield series thirty years forwards, smack bang into the middle of the Vietnam War. The similarities don't end there, as both games also shift the focus away from vehicle based combat to down and dirty infantry warfare. They still include plenty of new vehicles, but these don't tend to be as central to the game as those seen in BF1942; this is partly due to the fact that most of the maps are now set in the jungle, where there simply isn't room for vehicles to move.

Both also introduce a new class of vehicle, one that was proven in the Vietnam War as a valuable resource for the army – the helicopter. These have two major purposes; troop transportation and close air support (otherwise known as blowing the crap out of every living thing in sight). The choppers in BFV have one other handy ability, being able to drop a tow line to pick up and move vehicles. However, we doubt this feature will be used in public servers due to the high smacktard to serious player ratio. Other than the choppers, the other standout vehicles are the US patrol boats, which are loaded to the teeth with machine guns.

The coolest feature of the new vehicles in both of these games is the ability to play music, but their implementation is very different. In the case of EoD this only works with one song (Ride of the Valkyries) in one vehicle, the medic chopper. BFV goes much further than this, allowing music to be played in most American vehicles, with a choice of around 15 licensed tracks from the 60's and early 70's. There's nothing cooler than buzzing some ground troops in a chopper with "Surfin' Bird" pumping, as the guys on the ground will actually hear the music as you approach. But like the tow line, this feature is great in theory but will probably become rather annoying in public servers (Particularly given your penchant for Shania Twain – Ed).

As you'd expect, there is a wide range of new weapons present in the two games, including such favourites as the M-60, M-16 and AK-47. Unfortunately for BFV, EoD's weapons seem to be better balanced, with meatier effects. One

A BALANCING ACT

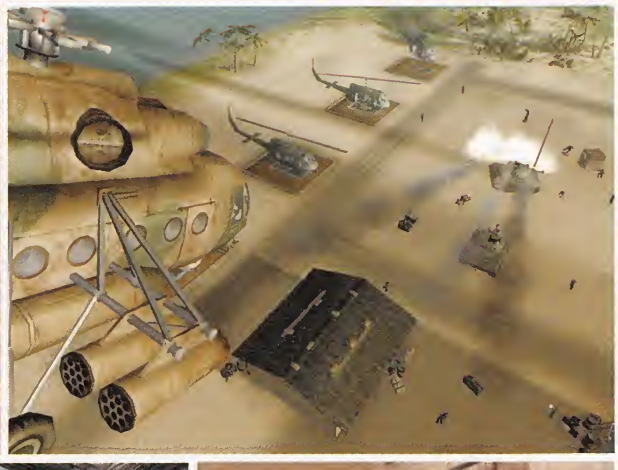
You might think that the US would have an overwhelming advantage due to its improved technology, but the developer has done a good job of balancing the two sides. The Vietnamese have several powerful tank and air units, as well some sneaky booby traps. These traps can be employed very successfully when defending flags, a feature that the US lacks.

There's nothing cooler than buzzing some ground troops in a chopper with "Surfin' Bird" pumping, as the guys on the ground will hear the music

You can now shoot from vehicles as a passenger. Get some!

BAD DRIVERS

As a RADEON 9800 user, I was more than a little disturbed to read that BFV doesn't support anti-aliasing or anisotropic filtering on this card - the card to own for power gamers. I tried to enable these effects, and was immediately presented with strange artefacts that made the game unplayable. A quick email to EA regarding the problem got me the reply of "It's ATI's driver problem". ATI told me they were working on it, but couldn't confirm if it'll be fixed. We've seen the same type of problem in two existing games; Far Cry and Halo. It was fixed in Far Cry, but not fixed in Halo. So we've got no idea whether or not it'll be fixed in BFV - let's hope that it is.



M16 vs Huey = death from above

particularly disappointing weapon in BFV is the M60; it's far too accurate for a heavy machine gun, and will surely become the most used weapon in the game. However, it shouldn't take long for the developers to notice and give it a thorough nerfing in the first patch.

As you can see, both games are so far very similar, but there is a major difference between the two - graphics. EoD has tried to implement undergrowth to more accurately represent the jungle environment, but is very simplistic compared to the new graphics engine in BFV. While it's a superficial difference, the new BFV engine is definitely much prettier than the existing BF1942 engine. The environment now contains copious amounts of grass, shrubs and other bits of greenery to hide behind, and generally looks much improved over the original Battlefield engine, if somewhat foggier. However, there is one problem with these new graphics, and it's a biggy - grass, and we're not talking about the stuff that proved popular with real troops in Vietnam.

From the player's perspective grass is only drawn at close ranges, fading out as the view range increases. As you move to new areas, the grass is drawn on screen as you get closer. This approach is necessary to allow for pretty visuals without bringing your stuttering PC to its knees. The problem is that when you're looking at somebody from a long range, you don't see the grass at all. They might think they're safely hidden in grass, but for anyone more than a couple of hundred metres away they're actually sticking out in the open. This makes grass only useful for hiding from an enemy at close range. But there's an even bigger problem with these seemingly innocuous blades of thin green plant life.

Most of the maps are covered in grass, with only a few small areas such as roads and bases grass free. The most accurate way to shoot in BFV is to drop to the ground in the prone position. See the problem? When you hit the dirt all you can see is a face full of grass, while your long range enemy can see you clearly, provided he isn't also lying down in a grass patch. It's a big issue as it makes the use of the prone position very problematic. Yet prone is arguably the most useful position for a player to be in, as it makes him more accurate as well as being harder to hit. Is it really worth having these spiffy visuals if they actually impede the gameplay?

There are a couple of other new features unique to BFV that aren't so controversial. When you try to capture a flag with multiple people it'll convert to your team more quickly, and a small timer will pop up showing you how long it's going to take. Each class also has the choice of two different weapon setups, and the choice to tweak their appearance.

Once again the singleplayer AI is truly atrocious, but that's forgivable as the focus for the game is definitely on multiplayer. Dial-up users need not apply; the large amount of network traffic necessary for 64 player games makes this a broadband only title, despite what the developer may claim to the contrary.

Scoring this game has proven to be very difficult. The only major difference between it and BF1942 is the improved graphics engine and a few subtle gameplay tweaks, but BF1942 has such brilliant multiplayer gameplay that this isn't really a big problem. And the existence of EoD, which is totally free and in some ways superior to BFV, will make the decision to purchase BFV a tricky one.

Remove EoD from the equation and BFV would be a must-have title for fans of the original. Unfortunately for BFV this isn't the case, so it will probably only appeal to those who place eye candy high on their list of gaming priorities.

Bennett Ring

RATING

FOR

Gorgeous graphics
Enjoyable new vehicles
Music feature is a laugh

AGAINST

Too similar to EoD
Grass problems
Heavier fogging

OVERALL

A worthy successor to BF1942 that suffers from the success of the EoD mod. It's still bound to be very popular with BF1942 fans though.

87

Lean back and sip some port. Starport, even.

EVE Online

Move over Freelancer, this game is truly Elite...

Developer: CCP ■ **Publisher:** CCP ■ **Distributor:** CCP (Online only) ■ **Price:** US$19.95/month ■ **Rating:** N/A ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
PIII - 450 MHZ or higher
128MB (256MB for 2000/XP)
32MB video card
1 GB HDD
Internet link

WANT
P4
256MB RAM
64MB video card
DirectX 9.0 or later

MULTIPLAYER
Multiplayer Only!

ONLINE
www.eve-online.com
Huge amount of game info, forums, official fiction, regular developer chats

We've seen something of a collection of space-trading games of late, with some notable disappointments. It seemed like we'd never get really close to the glorious ideal first showcased in the classic Elite. Having played EVE Online, my faith (on a sample of one) is restored.

EVE is a massively multiplayer space-trading/exploration game along the lines of Freelancer, except with a purely strategic interface – think Homeworld with one ship, and you're there. EVE is a spectacularly romantic vision of the universe, seen through smoky, rose-coloured glasses. EVE's universe is a gorgeous place loaded with deliciously sexy craft, obscenely beautiful planet models and blinding, burning stars. It's also velvet-lined with a classy, subtle soundtrack. There's a lack of furry-faced felines flying fighter craft, but strangely enough, it doesn't leave the game wanting.

Taking a few cues from Star Trek, EVE features four distinct races: the proud but warlike Caldarians, the arrogant and aggressive Amarrians, the Klingon-esque tribal Minmatar and the Gallente, democratic humanists with a European bent. Each of these groups occupies a corner of the universe, where you'll begin your adventure.

EVE doesn't resemble Wing Commander or Starlancer's gameplay at all, if that's what you were hoping. EVE is missing the traditional "action dogfight" parts of this genre – they've been sintered into a strategic realtime system. There is a certain amount of frenzied targeting that goes on, but it's broken down into sporadic decisions about what you're using, and who you're using it on. The decisive factor in combat here is all about the preparation and risk management you've done before the conflict begins.

What if?

This dearth of visceral high-gee turns and gut-wrenching manoeuvres makes EVE a leisurely, contemplative experience leaving you a lot of time to chat with other players and browse through the thousands of trade offers lodged for

A refreshing lack of furry-faced felines.

CLICK FOR ACTION!

The upside of making EVE a strategy game is that the experience is made impressively lag-tolerant. On a modest ADSL connection, I rarely saw any kind of connection lag or related problems, despite the majority of the game servers being hosted in London, England. The game also loads with lightning speed. Technically, EVE is extremely solid.

Damn, can't conquer this station yet!

RELEASE ME!

EVE Online is a MMOG which launched last year, but never saw a retail release here in Australia. CCP, EVE's Icelandic developers have recently secured the entirety of the rights to the game, and are now allowing players to join by simply downloading the client from their site. And you, the lucky readers, can simply install a special PC PowerPlay version hopefully next issue.

privateers. It's actually good to have this time to do some "what if" calculations and plan your next move.

If you can let go of the skills-based action dogfighting, EVE probably offers you the closest thing to the ideal first illustrated in the ancient spaceflight/trading sim called Elite. EVE is the real thing. Thousands of players in one single vast contiguous world, an insanely deep economic system where players can inhabit all the roles of buyer, seller, re-seller, trader and investor, combined with a giant tech tree of ships and weaponry from four distinct races.

Of course, there are limitations. EVE is not quite a contender for the Battlecruiser Millenium vision. You'll buzz many gorgeously shaded 3D planets during your jaunts across the cosmos, but you can't land on any of them. Nope, EVE is a deep-space, non-atmosphere, craft-only zone, and unrepentantly so. Also, all money-making activity in EVE boils down into a small list of basic tasks: mining, trading, escorting, piracy and policing. The majority of space stations can't be destroyed or damaged, and there's a large cast of NPCs who hand out security missions, place trade orders to re-stock their space stations, and even act as pirate fodder for budding bounty-hunters. Naturally, the serious money is traded between real players – and player pirates are dangerous on a much larger order of magnitude.

One of the major issues in MMOGs is the problem of defending new players from those who would prey on them mercilessly. EVE takes an elegant tack in this regard. Each solar system is held under a certain sovereignty and level of security, ranging from 0.0 (lawless) to 1.0 (police state). This is overlaid with EVE's "standings" system. This keeps track of each interaction between players and agents, corporations or even entire races, so that known pirates or those who've preyed on one group too long will be immediately attacked by their security forces in secured space. So, as pirates become more notorious, they're increasingly limited to flying in low or zero security zones, where generally only the roughest of hombres will venture.

This allows you to travel safely while you're a lowly space noob, gradually taking bolder steps into low security space, where lucrative bounties and more attractive business deals await amongst the pirates.

Easy navigation

In EVE, travelling is simple. You use giant jump gates to warp between solar systems, your warp drive to fly between stations and planets, finally using the incredibly slow impulse drive to travel short distances, less than 500 kilometres. A fantastic 3D galaxy navigation planner of dizzying scale will plot your course through numerous jump gates and star systems to your objective. While the game universe is vast and you can bookmark things that you find, there's no real capability for just "flying off" in a given direction. You'll always have to fly between known destinations on the map.

However, you need a certain proximity to detect non-obvious, "non-broadcast" locations like asteroid fields or criminal hideouts. Shrewd players will discover some hidden gems with careful scanning. You will occasionally find shadowy Buccaneer's Dens nestled in remote corners of solar systems, where shadowy fugitives have carved themselves a spidery enclave among strange skeletal fragments of asteroids. And if you kill one, you can take a sample of his DNA, to use as evidence to claim any bounties on his head.

As for your head, there's a great little interface when you create a new character. It's 3D, allowing you to powerfully individualise your character's face – down to eyebrows, makeup, and facial structure. It's amazing. This vision of yours then creates a character "screenshot" which will represent you in the game.

EVE is a MMOG that has been running for some time, so it has reached a high level of maturity. You'll be spared the usual teeth-grinding start-up glitches and hideous imbalances that often accompany a MMOG at its birth.

And the improvements continue – Player Conquerable Stations are supposedly coming soon. There's also an established and enthusiastic community, which recently broke the 7,000 simultaneous players barrier.

If you've been disappointed by some of the major space-trading games released of late, EVE Online could easily be what you've been looking for.

Ed Dawson

RATING

FOR

Great graphics, great sound, great interface, great trade dynamics.

AGAINST

No pilot simulation action. Limited tasks may eventually wear thin.

OVERALL

An incredibly slick game. All those feeling used by Freelancer and X2: The Threat should get on board.

89

Armed and Dangerous

Who will save us from this game of yesteryear?

Developer: Planet Moon ■ **Publisher:** LucasArts ■ **Distributor:** Electronic Arts ■ **Price:** $79.95 ■ **Rating:** M15+ ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
P3 1GHz+
256MB RAM
32MB Videocard
2GB HDD

WANT
P4 2GHz+
512MB RAM
Radeon 9700
3GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER
No

ONLINE
www.unification.net
Want to get married at exactly the same time as 64,000 other people? Check out the teachings of the Rev Sun Myung Moon

RATING

PC PowerPlay PASS

OVERALL
It's like Giants, only without the cool stuff

57

Way way back in the dim mists of gaming history - 2001 - a plucky young developer called Planet Moon released a quirky and whimsical game called Giants: Citizen Kabuto. The game combined almost every genre from FPS to RTS - even jetski racing - and tied it all up inside a very tasty 3D engine that pushed our primitive, abacus-like machines to the limit. There were two patches for the game: one to add vertex and pixel shader support, and one to take the bra off the main female character.

Jump back in the ol' time machine and flip to today. In 2004, cynical and embittered developer Planet Moon, now cut adrift from the disintegrating remains of Interplay and inexplicably picked up by LucasArts, has released Armed and Dangerous. The game is exactly like Giants, except without the cool innovative RTS stuff or the jetski racing. Or, come to think of it, the perky blue norks.

Guy Pearce ate my brain

A&D runs the same graphics engine as Giants with nary an embellishment. Vertex and pixel shader effects are included out of the box this time, but that's about it. What looked cutting-edge in 2001 now looks flat and uninspired. And, sadly, the gameplay matches.

I could insult your intelligence by synopsising the frankly idiotic storyline, but instead let me just say that the only thing to do in this game is run around shooting things. The main character, called Roman, has two buddies who occasionally accompany him on missions and run around shooting things themselves. They can be controlled with some limited commands, but mostly it's safe to ignore them.

A&D doesn't really look like any other game except Giants, to which it is identical. The engine is kind of weird - everything looks made out of some kind of die-cast plastic and the 3D objects don't seem to quite mesh with the landscape properly. Also, items such as ammo and health packs aren't 3D, but instead just animated sprites. In short, the game looks dated and ugly.

Closet Planet Moon fans would perhaps hope that the gameplay would outweigh any shortcomings of the technology. Sadly, not so. Armed and Dangerous is a straight-up shooter. You run, and you shoot. There are a few quirky weapons, such as the Topsy Turvy bomb which flips the scene upside-down, shaking out any hidden enemies. There's also a Shark bomb, which spawns a shark that swims around through solid ground popping up and eating things. Cute the first time you see them, but not really worth a second viewing.

FUNNY BONE

The 'humour' in A&D will either amuse you or shit the living Christ out of you. As any fool knows, the key to comedy is timing. Unfortunately, the nature of A&D's technology means that punchlines are almost always delivered slightly too late thanks to slow POV changes. Also, the cutscenes have been rendered at a rather disappointing resolution, and combined with low-poly character models, look crap. Finally, the whole premise of the game is shaky - the main character is supposed to be a thief, but stealth is simply not an option in this game. Also, the only way to understand what's going on is to read the story in the manual, which is printed black-on-dark-grey and runs to about 3000 words. Ouch.

No memento

Giants was a great game because even if it seemed at times almost too weird, at least you felt like you were playing something you hadn't played before - a rare sensation indeed these days. A&D, on the other hand, feels extremely traditional and like all 'traditional' shooters, this means it fails to take into account any of the core lessons learnt by the classics of the genre.

The guns are slightly too hard to aim, the player's speed is slightly mismatched with the model's animation, and the sensation of actually hitting anything is slightly retarded. Diverting for perhaps an afternoon, but certainly not worth a full price admission.

Anthony Fordham

Trackmania

Meet the game our editor played all month

Developer: Nadeo ■ **Publisher:** Digital Jesters ■ **Distributor:** QV Software ■ **Price:** $69.95 ■ **Rating:** G ■ **Available:** Now

It's not a racing game. Sure you drive a car in an effort to go from start to finish within a certain time, but it's not a racing game. That's like saying GTA is a racing game because you drive a car. But GTA, as we know, is not a racing game.

Trackmania isn't GTA either. There's no flamethrower and no paramedic missions. Sure you drive a car but you don't have to kill all the Haitians with it. In fact, there are no Haitians. Nor any racial stereotypes of any description. But there are cars, as I think we have ascertained, and here's what you do with them.

It begins with your dinky little car at the start line. There's a finish line on the map but there isn't always a track connecting it to the starting grid. Sometimes there'll be bits of track scattered around; other times there'll be none at all.

Here's where the clever bit comes in: you have to build the track yourself. At first it's easy. You lay down the default collection of basic track blocks, linking them together so as to join A to B. Then the green light appears and you drive as fast as your dinky little car will drive until you complete the course. But – oh no! – you've only set a time worthy of a bronze medal. A quick check of the required gold medal time later and you feel confused – how could you slash eight seconds off your 16 second record?

Trackmania is a puzzle game dressed up in the fire retardant driver's suit of a racing game. Indeed, it's perhaps not terribly far removed from the dilemma facing every Formula One team bar Ferrari this season: getting from A to B isn't the challenge, but working out how to even come close to assailing the Schumacher-esque gold medal time is.

There are of course tricks to learn. Like laying down jump ramps to create crucial short cuts. And this is where things get really interesting. The solution should be simple, after all you've got all the necessary pieces in front of you and there are only so many possible combinations of ramp, road, speed strip, banked corner and loop-the-loop. But then a few track challenges in and you'll be stumped by some new and fiendishly obscure permutation.

Oh sure, you can unlock new stages and proceed by merely securing bronze medals, but where's the satisfaction in that? A-ha! A sly tweak to the course layout there and you've just pipped the silver medal time. But don't get cocky, 'cos Trackmania will always get its revenge. You've still got to cut another five seconds off that time to snatch gold.

This is what budget gaming should be about. A whole game built around a novel yet borderline genius premise. It's what gaming used to be – back in the days of the C64 perhaps – before everything turned into a WW2 shooter. Some of you won't get it, but some of you will. And you'll cherish it. You lucky bastards.

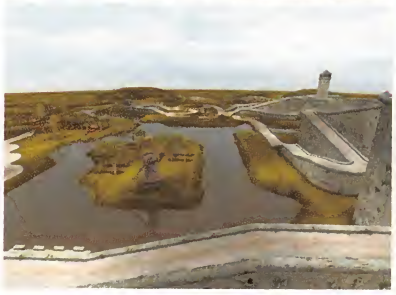
David Wildgoose

Here's where the clever bit comes in: you have to build the track yourself

All tracks lead to mania, as they say in the classics.

BUILDING SITE

There's a thriving and devoted community at the game official website www.trackmaniagame.com dedicated to pushing the track building aspect to its limit. You can download hundreds of player-made tracks and mods to pit your wits and driving skills against. Some of them are quite literally insane.



SYSTEM

NEED
450MHz CPU
64MB RAM
32MB 3D videocard

WANT
1GHz CPU
128MB RAM
64MB 3D videocard

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

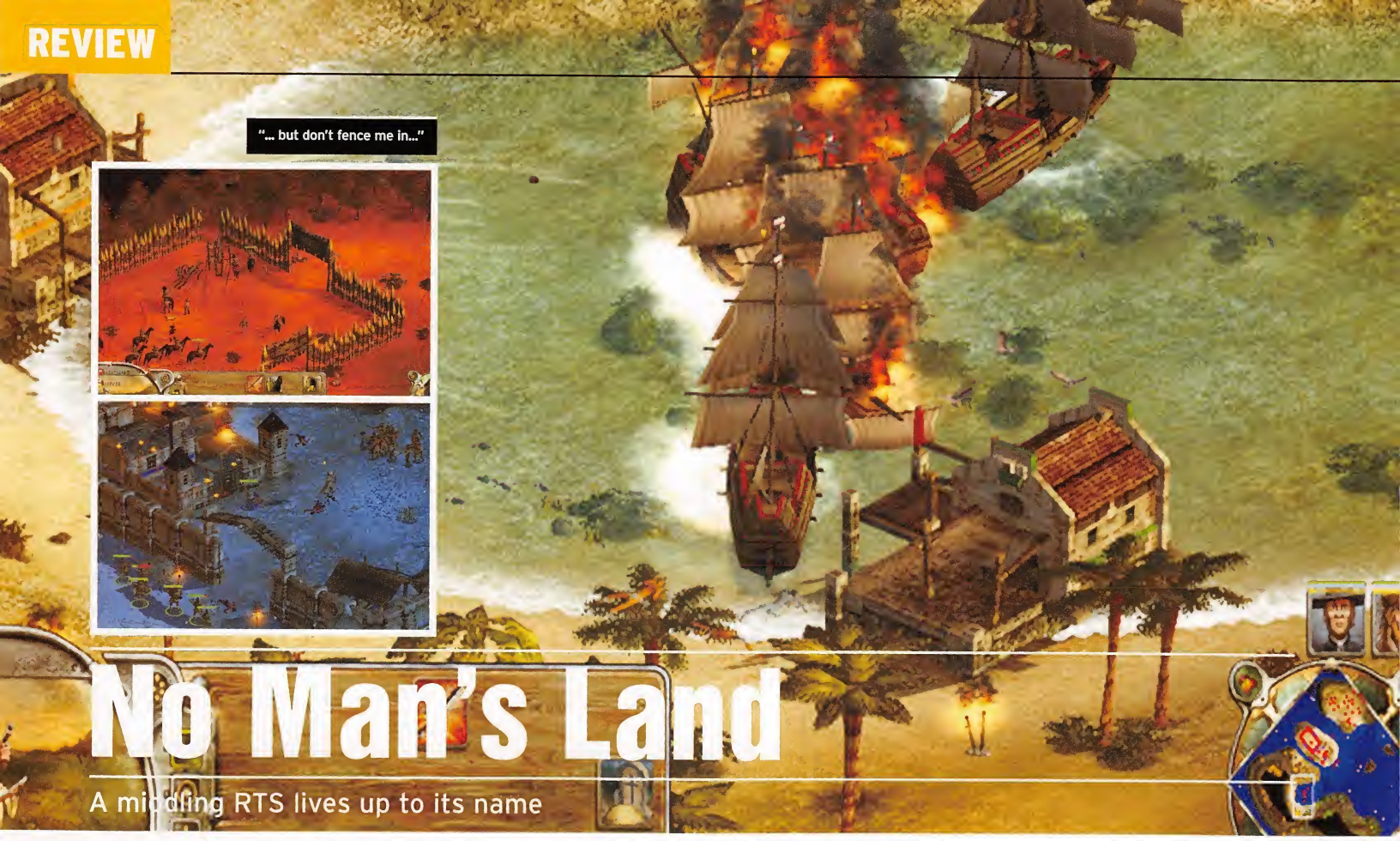
ONLINE
www.dataerah.co.jp/takagism/index_e.html
If you like puzzle games, see if you can escape the Crimson Room

RATING

PC PowerPlay GAME OF DISTINCTION PC PowerPlay

OVERALL
An innovative and addictive gem

83



No Man's Land

A middling RTS lives up to its name

Developer: Related Designs ■ **Publisher:** CDV ■ **Distributor:** QV Software ■ **Price:** $49.95 ■ **Rating:** G ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
667Mhz CPU
128Mb RAM
16Mb Videocard
1Gb HDD space

WANT
1.2Ghz+
256Mb RAM
32Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

ONLINE
http://www.cowboysindians.com/
The premier magazine of the West ... yikes! Check it out to see what I mean

RATING

PC Powerplay PASS

OVERALL
Solid RTS which lets you slap around US history

64

No Man's Land takes the concept of playing Cowboys and Indians and runs with it. Here we have the Americas from 1600 to 1900, from the Spanish looking for gold, right through to how the West was won.

If this is sounding a bit educational, never fear, this is how we all wish the West had been with Woodland Indians summoning spirit bears, Spanish missionaries exorcising evil spirits and, my favourite, undertakers summoning darkness. All of this schlock western charm gives No Man's Land plenty of room to balance the different sides by offsetting technology with talismans.

All up there are six factions, and they are, in order of appearance, the Spanish, Woodland Indians, the English, Prairie Indians, Patriots and the Settlers. One of the strongest features of the game is just how different each one handles and feels. The English have great musket units, and can fortify their towns by putting cannons in their towers but lack hand-to-hand; whereas the two Indian tribes lack cannons and some of the defensive tower action but make up for it with abilities like being able to swim through water, move through dense forest and summon allied units.

Each army gets some really fun stuff like the Witch Doctor's Storm Magic, the kick- arse Spanish armada and the Settler's steam trains which make for awesome armoured rapid-transit troop transports.

Being able to build railroads also lead to interesting game modes like the multiplayer challenge to be first to operate a functional train line, meaning you have to gather the resources for the whole project, while raising an army to defend your turf and trying to throw spanners into the works of your opponents (which are likely to be computer-controlled since finding players online is tricky). Capture the flag, deathmatch and eliminate the hero matches round out your multiplayer/skirmish options.

No Man's Land offers up several nice little surprises like ranged troops who actually skirmish away when close-combat troops come calling, assassins who can wait in hiding to spring like a loaded trap, special attacks like Plagues and Chastity Belts you can inflict on foes, bounty hunters you can sick on enemy elites (for the right price) and horses you can breed so you can combine them with foot units to give them new mounted stats.

Features some impressive visual details, like critters in the woods

Beyond that, No Man's Land features some impressive visual details, like critters in the woods and the way your musketeers kneel and reload with black powder every couple of shots. Unfortunately, the graphics don't really scream yippee-ki-ya or Geronimo, they more scream "I borrowed a Western theme."

This borrowed feel continues into mission design and if you've played RTS games before then the 30-odd missions are familiar, even if the six-shooters are new. All up, the gameplay is solid except for the friendly AI, which either charges units off to their deaths or makes them turn a blind eye to their buddies being cut down around them, meaning you really have to keep an eye on your guys.

No Man's Land has a lot of neat features but they don't quite come together to make the game bigger than its parts. If you like the setting then this is a good place to hitch your wagon, otherwise keep on riding pard'ner.

Timothy C. Best

NOT TOO CLOSE TO HOME

No Man's Land doesn't just play fast and loose with the action in their version of US history, it also tells it from an angle we haven't seen before ... a non-American angle.
That lets German Related Designs have a little fun with what they are doing and touch on some things that would make US developers cringe like including Plague as a special attack as well as liberally using terms like "Paleface" throughout the dialogue.
The game takes you from the Spanish greed for gold, to the puritan English settlers, onto the War of Independence and into the Wild West, all with tongue in cheek and a little rooting for the natives.

Ka-Booooooooom! Obvious really.

Massive Assault

A unique flavour of turn based mayhem

Developer: Wargaming.net ■ **Publisher:** Red Ant ■ **Distributor:** Red Ant ■ **Price:** $49.95 ■ **Rating:** G ■ **Available:** Now

Turn based strategy as a genre is something most mainstream publishers see as being roughly on the same level as cheese flavoured ice cream in terms of its' commercial appeal. Thankfully there are smaller developers and publishers out there who don't have a problem with creating games which appeal to a niche market.

Massive Assault is not actually a 'hardcore' turn based title with little hexes and units that look like board game pieces. As you can see from the screenies the game is based around a 3D graphic engine which supports most of the effects features of DirectX8.1. In keeping with this more accessible approach the designers have also streamlined the usual plethora of rules regarding unit facing, placement, opportunity fire and such into a simple set of rules and placed a lot of that level of micromanagement 'under the hood' so to speak.

There are two high tech 'teams' to control in the game with each having roughly similar units for the sake of game balance. Your units have different abilities which are designed to compliment each other in battle. For example the long range missile launcher works well in unison with the scout vehicles, the launcher usually comes close to wiping out most units leaving them about one hit point and the scouts can move quickly and do about one point of damage. Probably the main weakness in the game is in the actually number of different units at your disposal. Some more exotic war machines could have added a few more possibilities to your strategy.

Axis of evil

Battles take place on a variety of terrain types on different continents. Your land based units have their movement affected by the terrain they are moving across, while air and sea units move the same way at all times. There are definite line of sight rules as well allowing you to ambush enemy units or sneak up on them with indirect fire. Terrain is also broken up into 'countries' with borders. Some of these may begin as allies and all of them can be conquered and absorbed into your war effort.

If your battle against the axis of evil isn't going well you can visit one of your neighbors and try and add their resources to yours. However they will put up a fight first so it's important to make sure you can actually capture their capitol if you decide to invade. Once you have added a new territory's resources to your own it then becomes important to keep your opponent out of your borders because a country whose ownership is in doubt will not contribute to your cause.

Tough tactics

Obviously in a game like this the AI is an important feature and Massive has some pretty tough tactics to use against you. Another notable point about the AI is that it is very fast. You don't need to wait around twiddling while the computer player 'thinks' It takes its' turn almost instantly. Of course if you don't find playing against the AI interesting enough Massive supports online play and because it is a turn based game it doesn't really matter where you opponent is as lag is not an issue.

Massive Assault seems obviously made to attract the traditional RTS audience who might be looking for something a bit different. The gorgeous graphical presentation and streamlined game play make it accessible to pretty much anyone while still offering a real strategic challenge to all but the most hardened veterans.

There is a patch available at: www.massiveassault.com/patch.php

George Soropos

SYSTEM

NEED

Win98/2000/ME/XP
256 MB RAM
600 MHz CPU
8x CD-ROM or DVD-ROM drive
32MB Directx 8.1 video card
650MB HDD Free Space

WANT

1GHz CPU

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

ONLINE

http://www.massiveassault.com/overview.php
Grab the demo from here as well as new maps, scenarios and other stuff

RATING

PC PowerPlay GAME OF CREDIT PC PowerPlay

OVERALL

A great game for strategy fans looking for something different.

75

Virtual Skipper 3

Sadly minus the Bondy endorsement

Developer: Nadeo ■ **Publisher:** Nadeo ■ **Distributor:** QV Software ■ **Price:** $69.95 ■ **Rating:** G ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
Win98/XP
PII 450
64Mb RAM
16Mb gfx
DX9.0b

WANT
PIII 1GHz
256Mb RAM
32Mb gfx

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

ONLINE
www.vshq.com/index.php?txtShow=news
You can find out about online regattas, sailing clubs, game updates and find fan sites with new courses here

RATING

PC PowerPlay GAME OF CREDIT

OVERALL
A fantastic game for sailors when the weather is bad.

78

And now for something completely different. Italian developers Nadeo have had the 3D sailing market all to themselves for a while now, no guesses as to why, and given the lack of competition have done a pretty good job in improving their game over the years. Sailing is a big sport in Italy and the Italian game box has got some famous sailing bloke on the cover, ours has the Harbour Bridge. Pity they didn't put Alan Bond on the front, he could probably use the money.

Obviously this is a game for a very particular market. There are no Sega touches here like floating power ups, mini-gun pods or boat babes, just a hardcore sailing simulation. The no-frills Aldi kind of feel starts with the game's menu which is quite basic. There is also no tutorial other than the instructions in the manual making this a tricky game to learn if you don't already have some sailing knowledge. However if you're prepared to do some homework and stick with it Skipper 3 is really quite a good distraction from fragging and resource managing!

The first thing you notice about this game is its' spiffy graphics engine which has the best 3D implementation of water we've ever seen in a game. I suppose you'd expect that from a sailing title, but the boat and crew models are equally good as is the physics of the boats moving through the water.

Where Virtual Skipper 3 really shines though is in its no compromise approach to the sailing itself. The game models all kinds of forces: three different aspects of the wind, how that wind affects the ocean surface, the currents in the water beneath you and even how the rain changes the characteristics of your sails. There are four boat classes to race: the small Melges, offshore racers, America's Cup class and the massive Open 60 Trimarans all of which have unique handling characteristics and require different kinds of tactics and courses.

A good course designer is included in the game and there are many custom races already around for you to download. In fact you will probably need to if you want to enjoy the best aspect of the game which is the online play. The developers as well as several other 'sailing clubs' have been running competitive races for a while already. Some even involve winning real prizes. The servers are all in Europe

Models all kinds of forces, even how the rain changes the characteristics of your sails

but due to the nature of the game lag is only a minor problem and shouldn't stop Aussie gamers from getting their feet wet.

Skipper 3 has a nifty time-of-day feature which works of your PC's internal clock and with the very detailed weather configuration screen you can recreate the conditions right out side your window if you want to. The only thing its' missing is a direct real time weather implementation like the one in Flight Simulator 2004.

Winning sailboat races is all about reading the wind, positioning your boat and having the experience to make the right decisions at the right time. You might think that the immediate excitement you get from an FPS title would be totally missing here but on short courses in particular, and when the wind is gusting around, you really need to keep your eye on the ball and keep making constant adjustments to your trim to get the most speed from your boat.

George Soropos

Laser Squad Nemesis

Putting the "Eeeee!" back in email

Developer: CODO ■ **Publisher:** Just Play Now ■ **Distributor:** Just Play Now ■ **Price:** $49.95 ■ **Rating:** G8+ ■ **Available:** Now

Play by email. Never before have three words struck such fear into my gaming heart. CODO, allegedly the developer of the all-but-canonised X-COM, has decided that actually programming an AI into a PC game is passe, and that players would much rather engage in bitter and drawn out email conflicts spanning weeks, if not months.

Okay, maybe back in 1996 this kind of thing worked, back when people were obsessed with email and had to check it at least sixteen times an hour. Back then, email support - as with the excellent Battle Isle 3: Shadow of the Emperor - was a welcome addition, assuming the game also had a rich and detailed singleplayer mode.

Where's the beef?

At first glance Laser Squad Nemesis seems like a standard sci-fi turn-based squad game targeted at folks with ageing computers and modem web access who still want to take part in this great thing we call online gaming. Yet the packaging carries an ominous sticker: "GREAT VALUE!" it cries. "Includes three months online play!" That's right - once your three months are up you have to PAY MORE MONEY for further access.

The packaging is also encrusted with editor's awards and gushing quotes from a wide variety of gaming mags and websites. And all I can ask of my colleagues in the international press is this: What the blistering hell are you guys smoking?

For a play-by-email game to work, that game has to be damn complicated. It has to make waiting for the next email to be worth it. Each turn should take up heaps of time, and heaps of thought. It shouldn't be a game in which each turn takes approximately five seconds.

There should be more than three sides (LSN features the Laser Marines, the robotic Machina and the Zerg-like Spawn), and each side should have more than six kinds of unit. I'm not kidding - LSN only has SIX TYPES of unit per side. Even Chess, the king of play-by-email has nine.

Gravy train

Email aside, as a turn-based game, LSN is capable but hardly compelling. For a start, it's tedious to play. You have to choose your moves, then end the turn, then press the play button to see your turn acted out. Effectively, both players move at once, and the units react on the fly. Combat is therefore slower, but a little more interesting than traditional turn-about battles, since you can set your unit AI to back off when shot, move only until they see something, or otherwise change their minds halfway through a turn. This makes things more dynamic, but with so little game content, you spend more time watching than actually playing.

Some would argue that LSN doesn't NEED any more units. That the units are perfectly balanced. That the game is more Chess than Warcraft 3.

Nuh, says I. The game is limited. Compounding this is the total lack of AI. There is a scripting system in there somewhere, because there are a handful of training missions. But there is NO SINGLEPLAYER at all. Your only option for this play-by-email game is indeed to play by email.

With so little content, expecting us to then further pay a monthly access fee, no matter how nominal, is just insulting.

Anthony Fordham

JUST PLAY WITH YOURSELF

Just Play Now, with 5 'big' games in its stable, is obviously a brave new start-up that thinks it has found an interesting and lucrative new revenue stream - charging people to send emails to each other. If you're registered, you can choose any side and play any game type, even custom maps. If you're not registered, you can only play as the marines and are restricted to certain maps. Basically, you fork out $50 for what feels like half a game, and then they won't even let you play the whole thing until you fork out even more.

SYSTEM

NEED
P2-300
64MB RAM
8MB Video card
Email

WANT
P3-350
64MB RAM
16MB Video card
Patience

MULTIPLAYER
2 player

ONLINE
www.justplaynow.com
Maybe you can go on their forums and hurl a bit of invective. Honestly, what do these guys take us for?

RATING

PC Powerplay FAIL

OVERALL
Not enough game content to justify the play-by-email access fee

47

"Citizen! Please shoot me now... please!"

Robocop

Now I think about it, the movie was pretty crap too

Developer: Titus ■ **Publisher:** MGM Interactive ■ **Distributor:** Red Ant ■ **Price:** $79.95 ■ **Rating:** M15+ ■ **Available:** Now

SYSTEM

NEED
P3-667
64MB RAM
32MB Video card
500MB HDD

WANT
P4-1GHz+
128MB RAM
GeForce3
1GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER
No

ONLINE
www.paulverhoeven.net
Oddly enough robocop.com just redirects you to the MGM homepage. Here then, is the director's little place in cyberspace. Except it doesn't appear to work.

RATING

PC PowerPlay FAIL PC PowerPlay

OVERALL
Should be banned by the Geneva Convention

09

INT OFFICE - TITUS INTERACTIVE
Several faceless corporate types sit around a large conference table in the middle of which is a conference phone. The phone rings. One of the faceless corporate types answers it.

MGM EXECUTIVE (on phone): Hi guys! Glad to have you on board at MGM. Look, I'll keep it simple. We've got this bloody old sci-fi property called Robocop that was really big the late 80s but now we want to extract a few last bitter dollars from it as we run it into the ground. Can you knock us up a really awful game in a couple of months? Something along the lines of a really freaking moronic shooter with terrible graphics and no sense of fun?
FACELESS CORPORATE TYPES (in scary monotone): Your wish is our command.
MGM EXECUTIVE: Great! Your money's on the dresser, chocolate.

And as a result of that little conversation, or at least one very like it, we have to suffer Robocop on our hallowed game store shelves, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Call of Duty and Invisible War. How did such a game get released?

Robocop is truly, unmistakably, unforgivably awful. In fact, it's so awful that even were the game dipped in a bucket of wet cow plop and roundworm cysts and then served up to you as some kind of noveau-French cuisine with a cup of fat with a hair in it, the game wouldn't necessarily seem any more awful than if you had to actually play it. Like I did.

Consider, if you will, a bad Doom knock-off. That's right, a Doom knock-off, not a Quake knock-off. Robocop uses the very able RenderWare engine, but manages to completely fail to make anything of the new technology later versions of this engine offer. The game world is flat and uninteresting. Objects have the fewest possible polygons needed to vaguely suggest their nature. Robocop heals his complicated cyborg self with 'food' in tins, and restores his 'shield' with spanners and toolboxes which are unaccountably suspended in spinning antigravity fields somehow powered by ordinary wooden crates.

Crates of Wrath

There are lots of wooden crates in this game, but you won't have to waste your time opening all of them because like any interactive object in the game, a garish green box highlights the crates that actually contain items. The green box also highlights enemies, and helpfully turns red around hostiles and blue around friendlies.

Your task as Robocop? As far as I can tell, it's to scour the city in search of someone who can teach him how to jump. Robocop can't jump, you see. He can't run either. He just stomps through bland grey streets waiting for red boxes to appear around vague polygonal blobs which he then shoots. Occasionally, he descends into the sewers and fights giant rats or falls into badly designed level geometry and dies.

That's it. So you, as a conscientious consumer, need to ask if there is any reason at all to go out and buy this game. Do you love Robocop with the burning heat of a thousand suns? This game will only offend. Do you love shooters more than life itself? This game will only offend. Are you even semi-literate? This game will only offend.

If you see anyone in a game shop with this thing in their hand and a considering expression on their face, put on your best stiff-armed walk and intone: "Citizen! Put down the game! You have three seconds to comply!"

Anthony Fordham

GOOD POLICING

But wait! Robocop isn't just about stomping through the streets and shooting gang members! No no, it's about good policing. See, some gang members will throw down their weapons and put up their hands! Don't shoot them - or you'll be penalised by a green bar that kind of stretches across the screen until you die! Instead, you should walk up to these guys, and to the bums you'll see scattered about, and press the use key. Once properly 'used' the civilian will fade away into nothingness, and justice will have been successfully served. Now excuse me, I've got a CD to ritualistically destroy and bury at a crossroads... at midnight.

Korsun Pocket

Is that an action point in your pocket...?

Developer: Matrix Games ■ **Publisher:** SSG ■ **Distributor:** QV Software ■ **Price:** $49.95 ■ **Rating:** 12+ ■ **Available:** Now

Once upon a time, wargames were boxed affairs involving dice, range tables and pizza. Pizza still plays a vital role, but the advent of 3D graphics has changed the experience forever. Fortunately, those preferring strategic challenge to charging headlong into virtual battlefields haven't been completely forgotten, because developers like SSG manage to successfully combine the remarkable complexity and depth of hex-based games with PC processing power. Korsun Pocket will not appeal to everyone, but it provides an excellent representation of Russia's desperate attempt to destroy beleaguered German forces on the Eastern Front in WWII.

Korsun Pocket is a complex, hex-based title pitched at experienced wargamers. That said, it boasts a far simpler interface that many similar games, and the well-designed tutorials should see even novice players up and running without too much difficulty - provided they take the time to master the basics. The game ships with one major campaign, eight tutorials, a mission editor and a first-rate PBEM option. SSG has also thrown in an updated version of their Ardennes Offensive, which many veterans will recall as an exceptional study of the famous Battle of the Bulge.

Key strength lies in a solid interface that hides the depth and complexity behind every action

Korsun Pocket's key strength lies in a solid interface that hides the depth and complexity behind every action. All of the factors considered in board games are taken into account, including ranges, relative strengths, terrain limitations and supply, but SSG has replaced the tedious paperwork and calculations with simple on-screen indicators and a well-designed menu system. Importantly, the right-mouse options mean that players don't need to continually switch menus, and cross-referencing between various types of information speeds things up considerably. It's still not as intuitive as it could be with a little more design work, but the combination of on-screen tips and comprehensive tutorials takes away much of the pain for newcomers.

Unit control and grouping is straightforward, and the basic command and movement systems are fairly standard. The extended movement option works very well, as does the use of motor pool vehicles to transport less agile units. Combat takes some practice because there are so many factors to consider, but the Combat Advisor option identifies vulnerable enemy units and things get easier once the numerous visual cues are understood. The Combat Display provides a wealth of information and a simple means of structuring forces for combat (adding artillery etc.) and the Combat Results Table (CRT) will be familiar to anyone who's ever played any sort of wargame - you even get to see the tumbling dice!

Korsun Pocket is a terrific title that will amply reward the time it takes to work through the tutorials and master its key elements. Not really entry level, but those with limited experience will do OK.

Des McNicholas

IT'S ALL ABOUT COUNTING BLANKETS!

Supply is often the key factor in war and most successful commanders have understood logistics just as well as they have understood combat. Korsun Pocket takes a simplified but convincing approach to supply, and players are blessed with a host of information regarding their status. The supply status of the whole force is available at the push of a button, and individual units can be assessed in detail. Positioning supply units correctly is probably more important that getting the armoured spearhead in the right place, and units outside the Supply Net will quickly lose effectiveness. Supply is always difficult to model in a game, but Korsun Pocket does it better than most.

SYSTEM

NEED
PII 400Mhz CPU,
64MB RAM
8MB DirectX
Video Card
400MB HDD

WANT
500Mhz CPU
128MB RAM
32MB DirectX
Video Card

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

ONLINE
www.korsunpocket.com
Debate cardigans with your grandad. Oh and download some player-created scenarios while you're at it.

RATING

PC Powerplay GAME OF HIGH DISTINCTION PC Powerplay

OVERALL
A solid representation of a fascinating WWII encounter

86

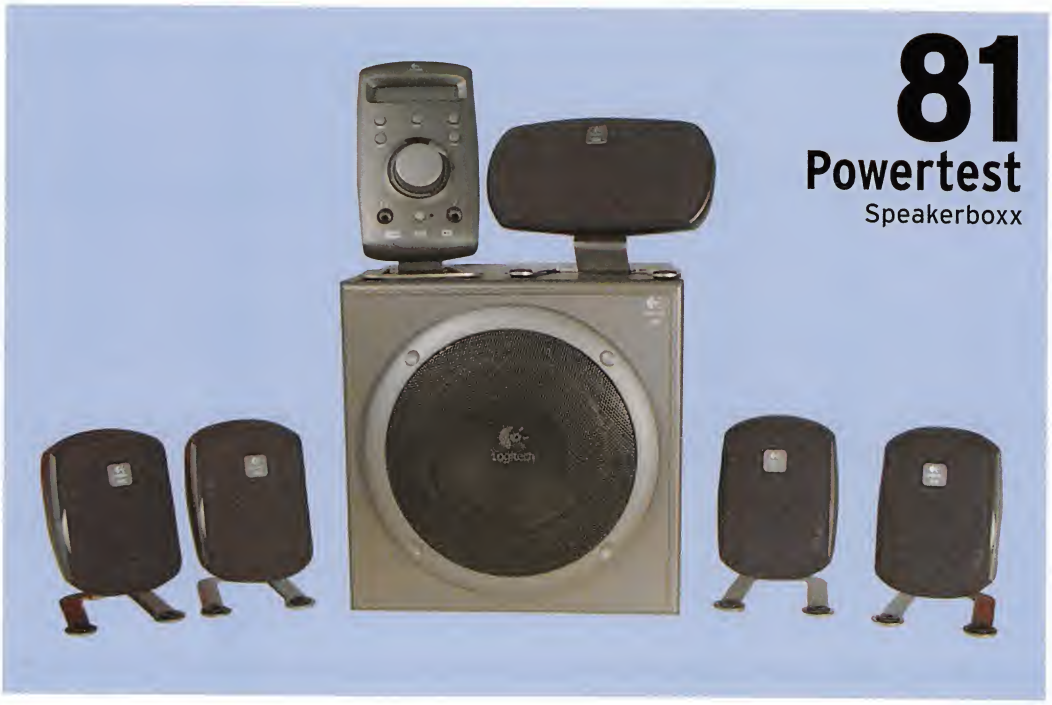
TECH IN REVIEW

Things are starting to hot up in hardware land. We've been expecting a boatload of new technologies to wash up on our shores beginning in March, and it appears that the first of these has arrived. I'm talking about TFT LCD monitors with 12ms pixel response times, something I've been keen to check out for a while. It appears that LCD TFTs are now good enough for even the most anal gamers, myself included, and you'll see why in the review of the Samsung 172x. This thing was so good we just had to add it to our Beast.

I also took the new Athlon 64 3000+ for a test drive, and it was nice to see that this CPU is much more affordable than the pricey Athlon 64 processors AMD has been releasing over the past few months. There's hope for existing AMD fans yet. Intel must be starting to sweat a little considering the glowing press AMD keeps getting, so it'll be interesting to see what they pull out of their multi-billion dollar hat over the next quarter.

A few of the more "out there" gadgets we checked out this month include a water cooling kit from the kings of mediocrity, Thermaltake, as well as another set of 5.1 headphones. The follow up to the TrackIR kit made its debut, surprisingly called the TrackIR 2, and it shows once again why the flight sim genre remains at the cutting edge of technology despite its declining popularity.

Our PowerTest for this issue took 12 sets of speakers for a spin, and over this time the wonder of Shania Twain became apparent to me. If you haven't heard this angel sing before, rush out to your nearest record store and enrich your life. Guys, stop punching me...



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Powertest
Speakerboxx

Bennett Ring
Deputy Editor,
bennettr@next.com.au

86 Samsung 172x
87 Athlon 64 3000+
88 Diabolic Minotaur
88 Antec Super Lanboy 350
90 Thermaltake Aquarius IIIr
92 Minitar 802.11g combo
92 TrackIR2
94 ASUS AB-P 2600 barebone
94 Mentor 5.1 headphones

HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 104. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake – it's all about using this hardware to make your entertainment even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.

SPEAKER BOXX

Bennett Ring discovers how much punishment the human ear can take.

Why is it that sound is always the neglected child of the gaming family? Could it be due to the fact that it's the graphics that smack you in the face, while the sound is content to merely whisper in your ear? And even though it's easy to overlook great sound, if there's anything wrong with it we'll all be bitching till the aurally challenged cows come home.

Yet now more than ever the sound system of your PC is important, thanks to the convergence of the HiFi, Home Theatre and PC becoming a reality.

When it comes to soundcards, we don't have a lot of choice - you can use a Creative soundcard, a Creative soundcard or perhaps even a Creative soundcard. There are other brands out there but they're usually hard to find. They're also often not up to scratch for gaming purposes due to the fact that most developers like to romp around in the EAX bed. But when it comes to speakers we're literally inundated with choices, and they range wildly in price.

when it comes to speakers we're literally inundated with choices

If you're still using a 2.1 speaker setup (two satellites and a subwoofer) please close PowerPlay right now and whip yourself repeatedly with a wet leather strap. If you haven't used at least a 4.1 setup before you don't know what you're missing out on. There's simply no excuse anymore for not running surround sound as every soundcard sold this millennium should include support for at least 4.1 speakers. Not only does having surround sound add immensely to game immersion, it's actually a massive aid when playing games as you'll receive audio cues regarding objects that are off the screen. This is especially relevant with shooters and action games; in these genres a gamer with surround sound has a distinct advantage over one without.

Pump up the volume

Testing speakers is quite different to most other bits of equipment, as it's a very subjective process. You can use a sound meter to measure the maximum dB or examine an oscilloscope as the speakers pump out various frequencies, but at the end of the day none of these measurements mean squat; it all boils down to how good they sound to the listener.

Yet there are certain measures to take that will help make these listening tests more valuable, specifically, what type of things you listen to. Now, I'm not exactly the world's most experienced audiophile, but PowerPlay's good friend Stuart Calvin knows more than a thing or two about these boxes that go boom. Here's how I approached Stu for help:

BR: "I've gotta check out 12 sets of speakers. I'm screwed like a nun who just left the sisterhood."

SC: "Oh dear god - do you want me do it?"

BR: "I wish. But we can't afford that, as we just had to buy a new roll of toilet paper. So can you tell me how to do it?"

SC: "Do you like Shania Twain?"

BR: "AIEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!"

Yes, Shania Twain. It seems she's got a great voice for speaker tests, thanks to her four octave range. Now, considering my only previous experience regarding Shania Twain was giving Amos (our DVD producer) crap about wearing a Shania t-shirt to work, I wasn't exactly keen on tainting my soul by listening to this pop banshee. But it had to be done, as Stuart had told me that "the bass needs good speakers for delivery, otherwise her music will sound like it's coming out of wet cement or mud".

Stuart also recommended I listen to an acoustic track, to test for echoes and the roll off of highs and lows - we used The Cure's acoustic version of Close to Me. Classical music was suggested to check for "strings and tings", so we used a track off the Amelie soundtrack, and as you'll see this track was the one that the speakers had the hardest time with. Stuart didn't recommend it, but I also threw in a bangin' hard trance track off the Midnight Club II sampler CD, to see how the speakers handled ground-shaking bass and to annoy all the techno haters in the office. All of the music was played off CD, rather than MP3s, as this is the purest source of music possible.

To cover the home theatre base, we used the Superbit version of Gladiator, checking for the clarity of the sound during the opening battle scene, as well as during a quiet scene involving an exchange between Maximus and Caesar. We were also looking for how "wide" the sound stage appeared during these scenes. Finally, the test that you were all waiting for - the game test! We simply had to use Call of Duty, as this game has some of the finest sound effects we've ever heard. We were specifically listening for three things; the clarity of sound effects, how well the sound surrounded us, and how well the game music could be heard while the speakers were also busy pumping out sound effects. All testing was conducted on a Creative Audigy 2 ZS, with the soundcard's decoder disabled if the speakers included their own.

The sound tests were each given a score out of 10. The average was then used as our sound quality score. The final score took this into consideration, as well as the speaker's features (Dolby decoders, remote controls, etc) and price.

Unlike many of our previous PowerTests, where most of the products were evenly matched, the differences between the speakers were immediately apparent. And for once the price tag wasn't necessarily an indication of speaker performance, so you should find our guide very handy indeed.

Altec Lansing 5100

• **Price:** $299.95 • **Supplier:** Innovision www.innovision.com.au • **Website:** Altec Lansing www.altecmm.com

These things are getting a little old in the tooth – they were released way back in 2002. They don't look it though, as they're quite futuristic looking thanks to their slim line design. Set up is nice and easy due to the colour coded cables, but it is a little disappointing to notice that there is no digital decoder included. A handy feature is the wired remote.

The 5100s struggled with the Amelie track, with a significant amount of distortion when the strings kicked in. But we can forgive them this, considering they weren't the only ones. The acoustic track was more pleasing, with notes holding and an overall crisp sound, but at times it seemed a little tinny. This was the first time I had to listen to Shania, and after struggling not to vomit, realised that she was coming across clearly, without drowning out the backing music. However, for each of these tracks the volume couldn't be cranked or distortion would show up. But during the techno track these speakers shone – the usually weak subwoofer seemed to go into overdrive. DVD performance was rather average, with a narrow soundstage, and the gaming performance suffered from the same problem

Considering the price, lack of decoder and relatively average performance, we'd only recommend these speakers to people who want their audio outputs to look like alien artefacts, and in that case the JBL are even weirder.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 7/10 Score: 7/10 **7**

AVLabs Amped 7.1

• **Price:** $249.95 • **Supplier:** Innovision www.innovision.com.au • **Website:** www.avlabs.com

7.1 speakers are a cool idea, but they're a little bit of a hassle. Finding space for 5.1 speakers is hard enough; throw in another two and you'll be living in a cable nightmare. Apart from this minor issue, I'll say it now - the only good thing about these speakers are the colour coded cables. While the subwoofer is nice and heavy, it pumps out as much bass as a squirrel farting. There is no decoder included, and as soon as the speakers are turned up to a decent level distortion kicks in. While the other speakers distorted Amelie's strings, these speakers murdered and then mutilated the sound beyond recognition. Not even a DNA test could prove that it was actually Amelie being played. The acoustic test wasn't quite as atrocious, but it came across as so tinny that I was expecting my ear drums to explode at any moment. Shania sounded very "hissy" and tinny, making her even worse than expected. The techno sounded woeful, with all trace of the mid range vanishing.

Luckily for these guys, the gaming performance wasn't quite so bad, saving them from being dragged out the back and getting hung, drawn and quartered. Sadly the DVD test wasn't great, as the panning between each speaker was very distinct, rather than the smooth transition that it should have been.

If you haven't noticed by now, we didn't particularly enjoy listening to these speakers, and we doubt you will either.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 5/10 Score: 4/10 **4**

Creative Inspire T7700

• **Price:** $299 • **Supplier:** Creative www.creaf.com • **Website:** Creative www.creaf.com

Not content with owning your soundcard world, Creative also have an extensive selection of speakers to ruin your hearing with. And as much as we'd like to bag them out, giving other audio specialists a chance, they obviously know what they're doing, as witnessed by the high quality of these speakers.

The inclusion of a remote was handy, but we would have liked for the speakers to be colour coded. Unlike the previous set of 7.1 speakers that we tested, the same effect of the Inspires actually made a noticeable difference in both the game and DVD tests. In fact, these speakers had easily the best surround effect.The music tests returned decent results, but they weren't quite at the same level as the movie and game tests. Amelie once again proved to be difficult, with muddy, distorted strings, but the acoustic test came across as excellent, although the voice was at times a little piercing. By this stage the Shania song had embedded itself into my brain like a tic into the hide of a cow, but it didn't mean I liked it. However, I could at least appreciate the Inspire's clear rendition of her track. The final techno test was very surprising, as the subwoofer pumped out bass equal to those double its size.

If you're only going to be using your speakers for gaming rather than music, and don't want to spend too much, the InspireT7700s should suit your needs.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 8/10 Score: 8/10 **8**

Creative Megaworks

• Price: $499 **• Supplier:** Creative www.creaf.com **• Website:** Creative www.creaf.com

A nice little THX logo is testimony to the quality of these speakers, meaning that they've been officially given the thumbs by the folks behind THX. After heaving the massive subwoofer and chunky satellites out of the box, it was quite surprising to see that there is no decoder included; at this price point it's a little strange. Another strange omission was a specialised centre speaker; due to the fact that this speaker does most of the work in 5.1 movies, high end speaker sets usually have a more powerful one.

The sound quality of these speakers was amazing. They still struggled a little with the strings of Amelie, but they passed every other test with flying colours. The acoustic test sounded as if we were in the studio with The Cure, and lacked the painful tinniness of some of the cheaper sets. Shania sounded excellent, with rich backing music coming through nice and clear as she gave her four octave voice a thorough workout. In fact, listening to Shania was actually enjoyable (tell anyone I said that and I'll hunt you down). The massive amount of bass provided by the subwoofer made the techno track sound amazing, while the game and DVD tests were equally impressive, offering rich, clear sound over a wide soundscape.

We were very close to giving these speakers our Power Award. Well, until we heard a certain set from Logitech that is.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 9/10 Score: 8.5/10 **8.5**

Jazz J8989

• Price: $99.95 **• Supplier:** Rectron www.rectron.com.au **• Website:** Jazz Speakers www.jazzspeakers.com

When we sent out the invite for this PowerTest, we specifically asked for 4.1 or better setups. So when Rectron replied that they were going to send a 1.1 system out, I reminded them of this small detail. They replied that this was a special 1.1 setup that was capable of doing 5.1 sound. This should be interesting, I thought to myself.

These speakers use a process known as Point Source Audio technology. The aim of this is to produce a wide soundstage from a single speaker. The first sound test went very badly for this speaker – Amelie sounded as bad as it had on the AVLabs set. Urgh. Next up was the acoustic test, and once again this speaker sucked pretty hard. For some strange reason, it simply can not handle pianos.

Shania was a little reluctant to be played through these speakers, but with a little persuasion I convinced her to do her thing. At this stage I realised that I'd been listening to the same Shania song too many times, and that this speaker thing couldn't handle it. After blowing all of these tests, imagine my surprise when the techno track actually sounded half decent. Both the DVD and game tests were clear, but there was no way they could compete with the other speakers.

For a single speaker, this gadget does pump out a surprisingly wide soundscape, but there's still no way it can be compared with true 5.1 speaker sets.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 5.5/10 Score: 6/10 **6**

Jazz 9929

• Price: $176 **• Supplier:** Rectron www.rectron.com.au **• Website:** Jazz Speakers www.jazzspeakers.com

After checking out the price of these speakers, not to mention the build quality, I wasn't expecting these little speakers to blow me away. After unpacking them from the box, I couldn't help but notice how stupidly short the cables for the rear speakers are. If you're thinking of using this set on your home theatre, think again, because they're simply not going to reach. They also come with an external "speaker box" which looks like a decoder, but isn't.

So far, so bad, but it's the sound quality tests that are most important. I fired up Amelie, and low and behold for the first time the strings reached my ears distortion free. Yes, these $176 speakers were better at reproducing the strings than the $500 Megaworks speakers. Next up was the acoustic track, and this was as clean and crisp as we could ask for, provided the volume wasn't set too high.

Unfortunately Shania let the team down, sounding very "hissy", but the techno playback helped to remedy this a little. The DVD test was impressive due to the clarity of the music right in the middle of a noisy battle scene, and the soundscape was nice and wide. Gaming performance wasn't quite as good, with a little distortion at the more "immersive" (read: brain shattering) levels.

If you're not after the loudest speakers and don't want to spend a wad of cash, the 9929s offer excellent value for money, outperforming sets that are over $100 more expensive.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 7.5/10 Score: 7.5/10 **7.5**

Jazz 9929B

• **Price:** $338 • **Supplier:** Rectron www.rectron.com.au • **Website:** Jazz Speakers www.jazzspeakers.com

Yes, this is an identical speaker set to the 9929s, with one important difference. Where the 9929s don't include a decoder box, the B version does. This box is capable of DTS and Dolby Digital decoding, allowing you to use both optical and coax cables to input the digital signal. Unfortunately it turns out that there is a big problem with Creative cards and external decoder boxes that can only receive a SPDIF input.

The problem lies in the fact that Creative cards do not output a true raw bit stream digital signal as outlined in various sound protocols. Which is a Very Bad Thing™. We're not sure if it's a deliberate attempt by Creative to hurt other speaker manufacturers, but the fact that its SPDIF output only works correctly with Creative speakers is of major concern. Unfortunately for these speakers, they only accept SPDIF input. If they had an analogue input via the minijacks it wouldn't have been a problem, but they don't. As a result getting these to work correctly with Creative soundcards in true 5.1 mode is impossible.

If you're not running a Creative card, this isn't a concern, and the same comments for the decoder-less 9929 speakers apply. However, while we can't blame Jazz for this problem, it still makes them incompatible for the majority of PC users, and the additional cost for the decoder is rather steep compared to some of the competition.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 7.5/10 Score: 7/10 **7**

JBL Invader

• **Price:** $330 • **Supplier:** BBS www.bbs.com.sg • **Website:** JBL www.jbl.com

You might recognise these speakers or their brand as usually being associated with Apple. Realising this, and trying hard to stop sniggering, I expected these speakers to be like many Apple products, with more style than substance. Damn I hate being proven wrong...

Yes, these are some seriously bizarre looking speakers. For that reason alone many people will purchase this set to go in their art deco loft apartment. However, they're only a 4.1 set, and they lack a decoder, but how do they sound?

In a word, excellent. There is something about the warmth of the sound they emanate that is hard to put your finger on. Yet again Amelie caused them to struggle, but every other music test sounded excellent. Not only were these speakers great at providing a nice clear sound, they were happy to do so at surprisingly loud volumes.

Considering the excellent results they achieved during the music tests, it was surprising to see that they came across as very tinny in the Call of Duty test. DVD quality was fine, but due to the lack of a 5th speaker the soundscape wasn't as wide nor as smooth in its transitions between each speaker as the 5.1 sets.

Unfortunately, just like most products associated with Apple, these are very expensive, especially when you consider that there is no decoder and only four satellites. Because of this we simply can't recommend them.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 8/10 Score: 7/10 **7**

Logitech 620

• **Price:** $199 • **Supplier:** Tech Pacific www.techpac.com.au • **Website:** Logitech www.logitech.com

This is the only 6.1 speaker set in the roundup – the sixth speaker sits at the rear between the standard rear left and rear right speakers. Like the other sets that had more than five satellites, these still only require a front, rear and centre/sub input.

No decoder is included but we didn't expect one for this price. A nice touch is the headphone jack on the front right speaker. By now you've probably already guessed that the 620s didn't handle the strings of Amelie too well, but they weren't atrocious. Their acoustic performance more than made up for it, as it ranked as one of the best sets in the roundup. This was to be the eighth time of listening to Shania's song, and by now I was actually starting to like it. Even though the guys in the office were starting to worry about me (other than Amos), I could tell immediately that these speakers couldn't do Shania's voice justice at the higher volume levels. The Techno track was rather average; very clear but lacking in bass. And then there were the DVD and game tests. Wow. Due to the sixth speaker the 620s stood out as having the best surround effect of every speaker tested. Sure, they weren't the loudest, but they were the most immersive.

We were speechless when we saw that the price of these speakers was a mere $200. Combine that price with their excellent performance, and the 620s are worthy winners of our Value Award.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 8.5/10 Score: 9/10 **9**

Logitech Z680

• **Price:** $699 • **Supplier:** BJE www.bje.com.au• **Website:** Logitech www.logitech.com

Have you seen the shaving advertisement where a grey headed old codger says something along the lines of "I liked the product so much, I bought the company"? Well, after checking out these speakers, I liked them so much that I bought the company. Ok, I didn't really buy the company, but I did buy a set of these speakers. Here's why.

Like the Megaworks that the 680s pipped, these are fully THX certified, and there's something intangibly cool about seeing the THX logo on your speakers. Unlike the Megaworks these speakers feature a hardcore decoder which can accept optical or coax SPDIF, as well as front, rear, centre/sub direct inputs, allowing it to get around the problem of the dodgy Creative digital output. They've even got a wireless remote control – one of the few sets in the roundup to do so.

And boy do they sound sweet. And incredibly loud. They creamed every single sound test, scoring almost perfectly in every category. What more can I say – these babies rock, even when playing the angelic voice of the wonderful Shania Twain, a woman who we should respect immensely for her valuable contribution to the music world. Dear... god... what is happening to me...

If anything is going to hold you back, it's the price - $700 isn't cheap. But if you've got it to spare, you won't be disappointed with the 680s. I wasn't.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 9.5/10 Score: 9.5/10 **9.5**

Videologic ZXR 550 $199

• **Price:** $199 for 5.1, $299 for 7.1 • **Supplier:** Syslink www.syslink.com.au • **Website:** Videologic www.videologic.com.au

The 7.1 version of these speakers are tricky little things. They'll take your 5.1 sound source, sneakily convert it to 7.1 sound and do it well.

Don't expect a decoder for this price, and it's also lacking a remote control. However, these shortcomings are balanced out by the high quality of the audio that these speakers output. At first these speakers came across as very tinny, but a quick adjustment rectified this problem. Unsurprisingly Amelia's strings didn't come across too well, but the acoustic test was great, albeit a little quiet compared to some of the other sets. My future fiancé Shania sounded like a voice sent from above, while the techno track suitably rocked da house without losing the mid range in a haze of super bass. If there was one complaint we could make, it's that these speakers weren't quite as loud as the Logitech 620s. Most impressive of all were the DVD and game tests, with a surround effect that was second only to the Logitech 620s. The music from the battle scene was easily discernible over the clashes and clangs of the opening battle in Gladiator, while Call of Duty sounded just how we imagine the developer intended.

These speakers have a great reputation for offering plenty of bang for your buck, and our listening tests back this up. Excellent speakers for those on a budget that don't want to deafen the neighbours with exceptionally loud music.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 8.5/10 Score: 8/10 **8**

Yamaha TSS-10

• **Price:** $369 • **Supplier:** Yamaha www.yamaha.com.au • **Website:** Yamaha www.yamaha.com.au

Damn you Creative, damn you to hell! Due to the fact that you don't output a true digital signal, companies like Yamaha suffer! That's right folks, the TSS-10's are another set of speakers that only accept optical SPDIF input to the built in decoder for 5.1 sound. As a result, it's impossible to get these speakers to operate in true 5.1 mode when playing games if you're hooking them up to a Creative soundcard. Bastards. However, if you hook these up to a SPDIF output that isn't coming from a Creative card, the delights of DTS and Dolby Digital are at your fingertips.

It's a shame, as these little guys pack a nice amount of punch considering their petit dimensions. If you're strapped for space, these are some of the smallest speakers in the roundup.

They're not the loudest of the lot and they're a little lacking in bass, but for the most part they sound very respectable. As per usual Amelie hurt them, but the other tests were more than acceptable. The DVD test sounded very good, with a nice wide soundstage and clear music behind the clashing of metal, but due to the Creative issue we couldn't test these speakers in-game.

These speakers offer quite good value for money considering they include a decoder, but the problem caused by Creative will render them unsuitable for many gamers.

PCPP Score

Sound Quality: 7.5/10 Score: 8/10 **8**

Samsung 172x

• **Price:** $900 • **Distributor:** Altech www.altech.com.au • **URL:** Samsung www.samsung.com.au

According to manufacturers of LCD TFT monitors (aka the skinny screen), the beloved CRT monitor (aka the big fat screen) has been on its last legs for at least the past three years. Yet every time a new generation of TFT has been released, discerning gamers have noticed that they're still not up to scratch when it comes to gaming performance. The brightness, contrast and vibrancy have been fine. In fact they've been even better than our CRT monitors in these regards. Where they've fallen on their butt has been the pixel response time (PRT).

According to the ISO 13406-2 standard, PRT is the total time taken for a pixel to be turned on and then off again. In a CRT monitor this takes mere microseconds, which is imperceptible to the human eye. But in an LCD TFT screen this is measured in milliseconds, which we can notice. Over the last few years we've seen the PRT of LCD TFTs plummet from over 30 milliseconds down to 16 milliseconds. Unfortunately even the 16 millisecond monitors exhibited something that gamers hate, and that is a direct result of higher PRT - motion blur. Whenever the onscreen graphics move, a slight blurring effect is noticed, and this is especially prevalent in brighter scenes or scenes where most of the picture is moving rapidly. Many gamers found the 16ms models lowered the motion blur to an acceptable level, but there was still a large portion of gamers (those like me who take gaming far too seriously) who found it unacceptable.

I'm happy to announce that our saviour has arrived. The 12ms PRT monitor is here, and it rocks. I took a look at the first 12ms model to hit Australian gamers - the Samsung 172x.

This 17" beauty was impressive even before I'd plugged it in to the video card. By the way, for those of you unfamiliar with TFT LCDs, a 17" TFT LCD has around the same viewable area as a 19" CRT monitor.

Expecting it be nice and thin, I couldn't help but think that this screen is ridiculously anorexic, at a stunning 2.5cm at the widest section. The miniscule bezel also helps to give the impression that this monitor is basically all screen, with very little plastic packaging. The monitor controls are hidden underneath the bottom edge, which makes them a little hard to see, but a single press of the auto adjust button should be all you need to perfectly calibrate this monitor. It was amazing to see this button take care of the screen position, contrast and brightness levels. Even the heavy moire pattern that showed up during screen calibration disappeared once auto adjust was used.

So it's obvious that this monitor looks gorgeous and has a very handy auto adjust button, but the crucial matter is how it performs. The first test to be used to measure the image quality was DisplayMate (www.displaymate.com), which PCPP has relied upon in the past to supply objective results. And as we expected the 172x totally blitzed every test, which isn't uncommon for LCD TFTs. Especially noteworthy were the vibrant colour tests, high levels of colour accuracy and perfect geometry.

Another benefit of LCD TFTs is that they have much less glare than CRT monitors due to the fact that they don't have a reflective screen. This was proven when our advertising manager thought that I had stuck a paper picture to the screen when the Battlefield Vietnam menu was being displayed. Impressive to say the least.

All of these tests are of static objects, so they didn't stress the one area that of most interested to gamers - the new 12ms PRT and its resulting impact on motion blur. The best procedure to test this aspect of the monitor was to fire up a couple of games and have a blast. First person shooters tend to be the genre that exhibits the most motion blur so Battlefield Vietnam and the UT2K4 demo were used for these tests. Yes, my job is very stressful.

To say I was impressed with BFV is a major understatement. Keep in mind that I've seen many 16ms models in the past which weren't good enough for my needs, so I wasn't expecting a meagre 25% decrease in PRT to make much of a difference. I was wrong.

Motion blur has been almost totally removed. Occasionally a tiny amount would show up, but for the most part it didn't exist. Nill. Nada. Zip. Zilch. Likewise with the UT2K4 tests, which ran superbly. As a result, I've now been converted to TFT LCDs, and look forward to replacing my clunky 21" CRT behemoth with one of these monitors.

One other issue with TFT LCDs in respect to gaming is that they often don't look too great if the game isn't being run at the monitor's native resolution, in this case 1280 x 1024. I'm happy to report that this isn't the case with the 172x. Even when games were being run at 1024 x 768, 1152 x 864 or 1280 x 960, it all looked good.

As a reviewer I'm not supposed to sound too gushing about a product but sometimes it's hard not to. The Samsung 172x is one such product, as it shows that the technology behind TFT LCDs, more specifically the pixel response time, has finally evolved to a point where it's usable by the most demanding of PC users - the gamer.

Bennett Ring

our saviour has arrived. The 12ms PRT monitor is here, and it rocks

SPECIFICATIONS

- 17" viewable area
- 270 cd/m2 brightness
- 500:1 contrast ratio
- 160/140 viewing angle(H/V)
- 12 ms pixel reponse time
- Analog/digital interface
- 1280x1024 native resolution

PCPP Score

Goodbye CRT, Hello LCD TFT. Finally you can kiss your big assed monitor goodbye and enter the land of slimline screens.

95

Athlon64 3000+

• Price: $350 **• Distributor:** Avnet www.avnet.com.au **• URL:** www.amd.com.au

Hear ye, hear ye, we hereby declare 2004 as the year of the Athlon64. Maybe. Well, it actually all depends on how high Intel can get the Prescott P4 to scale, but if we had to bet on it, our money would be on the AMD horse. Unfortunately, much to the dismay of traditional AMD fans (you know the ones - they dine out at soup kitchens and call Good Sammy clothing bins home), the Athlon64 also set a new precedent in terms of AMD pricing. No longer is AMD chasing the low-margin, budget sector of the market – prices of the Athlon64 are up there with the most expensive that Intel has to offer. This has deterred many AMD fans from upgrading to an Athlon64 platform, but finally there is a more affordable entry point to the world of 64-bit processing. Let's give a warm welcome to the slightly crippled Athlon64 3000+.

Yes, slightly crippled. Let me explain. One of the most impressive features of the launch Athlon64 was its 1MB of L2 cache, which is part of the speedy memory built in to the CPU. Both the 3200+ and 3400+ versions of the chip feature this performance enhancing amount of cache, but something strange is about to happen to the Athlon64 family, starting with the 3000+; AMD has halved the L2 cache to 512k. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't CPU features generally meant to increase over time, not diminish?

We asked AMD what the story was regarding this halving of the cache, and their reply was that "not all future Athlon 64's will transfer to 512k of L2 cache. AMD processor model numbering denotes performance measurements around increased features of the processor like frequency or cache size or other functionalities like front side bus etc. In essence, AMD may offer some Athlon 64's in the future with 512k or L2 cache or they may not - it depends on performance." So it appears that adjusting the amount of cache is just another way of differentiating performance other than the standard method of increasing or decreasing the CPU's frequency.

Other than this lowering of cache, the 3000+ is identical to the Athlon64 3200+, with both CPUs running at a speed of 2GHz. There is one other main difference between the two; pricing for the 3000+ is around a hundred bucks cheaper than the 3200+, hovering around the $350 mark at the time of writing.

Before we get into the performance benchmark results of this new CPU, we should say a thing or two about its ability to overclock. It must be noted that neither of the two popular Athlon64 platforms, the VIA K8T800 and NVIDIA nForce3 150 chipsets, can lock the PCI or AGP ratio. And due to the fact that AMD has disabled multiplier adjustments on the Athlon64 family (bastards!) frontside bus overclocking is the only available overclocking route to higher frequencies. This is a problem due to the lack of PCI and AGP locking; increase the frontside bus and you'll be running your video card and PCI devices out of spec. In fact, if you raise the frontside bus any higher than around 10% the machine is going to crash as a result of the increased PCI/AGP speeds. So it was no surprise to see that we could only overclock the 3000+ by 10%, increasing the frequency to 2.2GHz. The test bench managed to boot up at 2.25GHz and run a couple of benchmarks, before deciding that the increased PCI bus speed was too much for it, hosing the hard drive. Still, 2.2GHz isn't too shabby – it's actually the same frequency that the 3400+ runs at. And we're sure it'll go higher once a suitable chipset with PCI/AGP locking becomes available.

Now, on to the benchmarks. We could only get our hands on the Athlon64 3400+ and Pentium 4 3.2GHz for comparison, both of which are more expensive than the 3000+ (the 3400+ is twice the price, while the P4 is around $100 more). However, they still clearly illustrate that the 3000+ is a speedy little chip for the price.

The Comanche 4 test had the 3000+ trailing the pack, but it was only a fraction slower than the P4 and around 10% slower than the 3400+. The 3DMark03 CPU test showed a similar result, although this time around the P4 edged a little further away, but again the difference was still only around 10%. The tables were turned in the final two benchmarks, with the P4 coming last. Our 3400+ still retained the lead, but not by a margin that justified a doubling in price over the 3000+. Obviously the removal of half of the L2 cache hasn't had a huge impact on gaming performance.

At half the cost of the fastest processors, but only marginally behind them when it comes to churning out the game frames, the 3000+ offers remarkable bang for your buck. The only problem is the future of the Socket 754 platform that it's based on, which is due to be phased out by the end of the year, with the newer Socket 939 (complete with dual channel memory goodness) hitting the scene soon. As a result we still recommend you hold off on purchasing an Athlon64 until then, but if you're desperate for a new processor now, the 3000+ is a very attractive option.

Bennett Ring

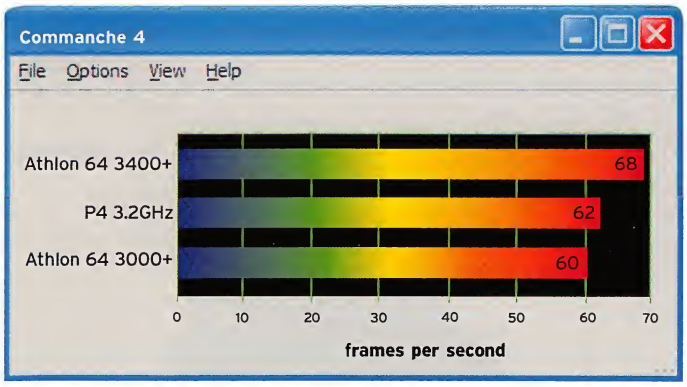
SPECIFICATIONS

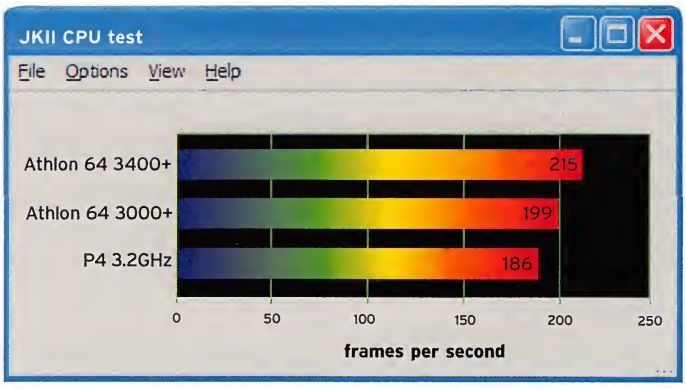
- 2GHz
- On chip memory controller (supports DDR400)
- 128k L1 cache
- 512k L2 cache

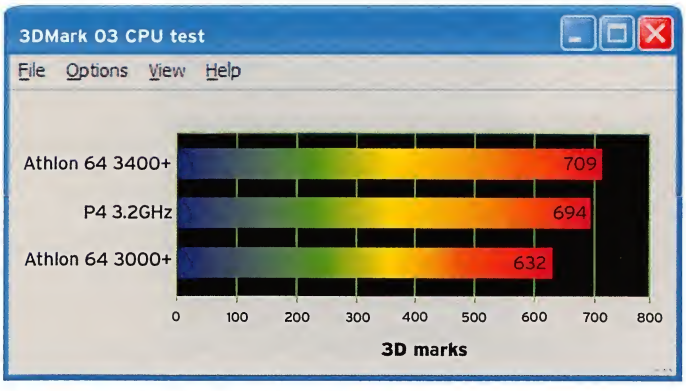
PCPP Score

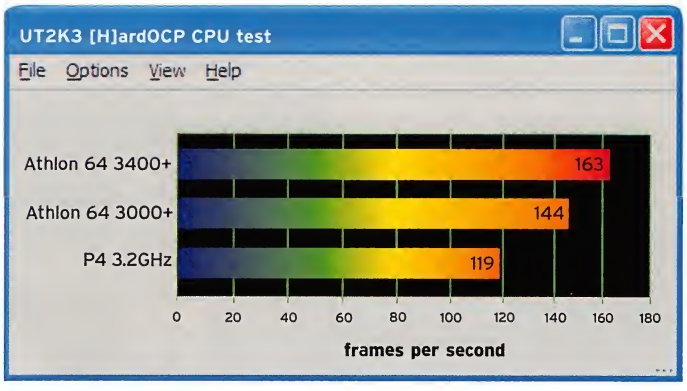
While the Socket 754 platform doesn't have a lot of life left in it, if you're desperate for a new CPU, this one is our pick of the bunch.

90









Antec Super Lanboy 350

• **Price:** $225 • **Distributor:** Altech www.altech.com.au • **URL:** Antec www.antec-inc.com

In my dream, my Apache is spitting death down on Saddam's T&L rendered loyalists, until that is, the bubbling in my paunch informs me that I'm hungry. No pizza run for me, as only the best will do. I just open the compartment on my Super Lanboy, pull out a delectable cheese and mustard hotdog, and continue my aerobatic onslaught...

Then I wake up, to find that this case does indeed have a spiffy secret compartment. It's no good for manufactured meat products though; while the temperature inside is great for CPUs, it's also just right for Mr. Salmonella. So my dreams remain partially unrealised.

This case has great airflow, thanks to its 120mm case fans, one at the rear, and a spiffy glowing blue one at the front. It's also relatively quiet due to the low RPM of the fans, and with the rear fan being rubber, rather than screw mounted. The front fan's power cable is a tad short, and the holes in the plastic fan grills are pretty large which might lead to a bit of dust invasion long term. But overall, it's a nice cooling implementation.

You could install 4 optical, 2 FDD, and 4 HDD devices inside, but it would be a very crowded house. Most of these, as well as any AGP/PCI cards, are mounted with good old fashioned screws. Well, except for the HDDs, which use pluggable cradles and additional custom screws. I suggest keeping these special screws safe in the secret compartment, or it'll be 'Temperature rising...pulse quickening....Rage..taking..over!' time whilst you hunt for them.

The finish inside is excellent, with all edges rolled and smoothed. And don't forget you're also getting an almost legendary ANTEC PSU (350W) thrown into the deal for a reasonable price.

Speaking of which, is it worth it? Based on the inside, I'd say yep, but the outside helps to cinch the deal. The very nice aluminium finish, large plexiglass window, and an attractive, if plasticcy, front glowing bezel make it very appealing for the mobile gamer. It has a slightly sticky drive cover door, but you'll probably appreciate that when you're lugging it around anyway. A job made easier I might add, by the inclusion of a sturdy carry strap and a very low weight of 6Kg, including the PSU.

Jason Brown

SPECIFICATIONS

- Cooling: 120mm exhaust and inlet fans
- Front ports: Audio in/out, USB x 2
- Material: Alluminium/Plastic
- Weight: 6Kg
- PSU: 350 Watt

PCPP Score

A great LAN candidate (Landidate?), and cool on a few different levels. **90**

Diabolic "Minotaur" Mid ATX Gaming Tower

• **Price:** $245 • **Distributor:** www.pccasegear.com • **URL:** www.casedge.com

Why stamp a product with such a detrimental title? I already have enough components that act like they're possessed, do I really want another one? Jeepers, Bennett even declared it as 'mad!' Can a case that's diabolical and mad, possibly be... good?

At rest, it's a mild mannered PC case with a complexion problem. Turned on though, you'll be pressed to ignore the voices instructing you to dismember innocents, to wreak carnage and chaos, to... oh wait, that's just the Vice City mission briefings I'm hearing.

You can tell that it's hot where this devil with the spooky red glowing eyes comes from as it features a fanless inlet duct for the CPU, fixed to the side window panel. An interesting and necessary idea, but one that seems like an afterthought to compensate for the shortage of fan mounts. I say fanless, but you could, with a bit of modification, install an attached inlet fan here to make it an active rather than passive duct.

Two thumbscrews is all it takes to remove the side panel, but only one side opens, the other is riveted shut. Fear not though, thanks to an effective screwless installation design it'll never need opening. All the disk drives, and even the motherboard, are simple plug-n-stay! Actually, the drives do need special mounting brackets screwed into them prior to their 'screwless' installation. Ironic, yes, but it does allow upgrading without prying the rivets off. Which you won't be able to do anyway with the goat hooves that mysterious spouted from your sleeves. I knew that slight bloody cut it gave me had some dark purpose!

To complement its impish appearance, this case has some really 'wicked' features. Like the racks for holding excess screws and mounting brackets, the sturdy internal connecting cables, the beastly maw that hides the USB/firewire/sound ports, and the eerie green 120 mm extraction fan. I also like the nice implementation of flip out feet, with frictionated (yes, I made that up) centres that work perfectly. It may not be a case-modders canvas, but it's so much like a semi-screwless meccano set, who cares?

All this evil comes at a weighty cost of 12 Kg (including the 400 watt PSU), making this a fat (and phat) case. You also get a free generic cold cathode, and an instruction manual for a slightly different case model. But then what do you expect from the prince of darkness?

Jason Brown

SPECIFICATIONS

- Weight: 12 Kg
- Drive bays: 10 max
- Cooling: One 120mm exhaust, one fanless CPU inlet

PCPP Score

The exterior is a devil of a cliche, but it's all good and gadgety on the inside! **86**

Some people are kinda nuts. Their malformed cerebrums (that's 'brains' for those of you who skipped Bio class) compel them to game wherever they can. Hey, we're kinda nuts ourselves. That's why our portable Super LANBOY case packs all kinds of gravity-defying goodies. Like a lightweight anodized aluminum body. A free carrying strap. Plus nine drive bays and two 120mm fans. So game wherever you want. Just use a safety net, OK? To learn how we can help you lift your game to a higher level, visit **www.antec-inc.com.**

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Thermaltake Aquarius III

• Price: $399 • Distributor: www.pccasegear.com.au • URL: www.thermaltake.com

Thermaltake has come a long way since the days of its venerable core-crushing Orb cooling solutions for the Athlon. However, having expanded into casing products, keyboards, mice and various overclocking/modding related accessories, one realm which Thermaltake is yet to conquer is that of extreme cooling. While many manufacturers have been looking to bring such technology to the mainstream for years now, Thermaltake's timing is just about perfect. Why? Well, as discussed in our Prometia Mach II review last issue, with today's CPUs dissipating in excess of 100W, it's only now that extreme cooling is becoming absolutely necessary for those in need of an adequately cooled, not to mention silent, high end system.

Looking like something out of Star Trek, the Aquarius III is a very intriguing device indeed, designed primarily with portability and ease of installation in mind. For those who are familiar with its predecessor, the Aquarius II, the Aquarius III uses virtually identical parts, save for the fact that they are now housed in an aesthetically pleasing enclosure featuring a multitude of displays and other widgets to aid in the analysis and adjustment of cooling performance. This includes a fan speed controller knob (for the radiator fan), which can be adjusted between 2000RPM and 5500RPM, a fan speed display (listing both radiator fan speed and pump speed), a water temperature display (the probe is attached to the radiator), and a CPU temperature display. Temperature displays show both actual and alarm temperatures, allowing users to conveniently monitor the status of their system as well as predict issues which may arise in the future. Furthermore, if temperatures reach alarm-level, the backlight of the displays turn from blue to red, while a loud beeping sound will also be emitted. If you've torched a few systems using primitive water-cooling solutions in the past, you'll certainly fancy the accessibility of the Aquarius III.

Being an external device, all of the system's major components are located in this housing, with the obvious exception being the copper waterblock, whose hosing neatly connects to the rest of the kit using an ingenious PCI back plate method. While you'll have to forego one of your PCI slots, short of busting out the dremel, installation couldn't have been any cleaner. Additionally, the waterblock features a universal design, making it compatible with Pentium 4, AthlonXP and Athlon 64 processors, as well as a smooth finish which again minimises user-intervention.

As with many of ThermalTake's products, the Aquarius III has been colour-coded in order to match the company's Xaser case series, however, this by no means implies that it looks out of place when coupled with other enclosures. In fact, Thermaltake is so confident of the unit's design that it has directed the Aquarius III particularly towards LAN party fanatics, as highlighted by the inclusion of a handy carrying harness.

we'd be lying if we said that these results were on par with what we expected

Overall, installation of the unit is quite painless, with ample tubing provided in order to allow users to position the device in a number of different ways, such as under a desk. Furthermore, the labelling on the device is almost patronisingly clear, which is particularly handy for novices. However, please note that your motherboard will need to have mounting holes around the CPU socket in order to be compatible with the Aquarius III, which thankfully is the case for 95% of boards produced today.

As with the Prometia Mach II, we tested the Aquarius III using a Pentium 4 3GHz-based system running an Abit IS7 motherboard, a Radeon 9800 Pro and 1GB of OCZ DDR500 memory, with the Lian-Li PC65 being our enclosure of choice. Under load, the unit only ran 5 degrees (Celsius) lower than our stock Intel hs/f unit, which is a far cry from the negative temperatures we saw on the Mach II. While water-cooling systems aren't known to produce sub-zero temperatures, we would be lying if we said that these results were on par with what we expected. Thus, after extensive testing, we've attributed this issue to the meagre 200ml reservoir and piss-weak 120L/hr pump, which is simply not powerful enough to keep cool water flowing throughout the system on a consistent basis. Also of note is the fact that the difference between the 2000RPM and 5500RPM radiator fan speeds is virtually negligible and thus, the system is able to run at its optimal performance levels whilst at the same time being virtually silent. Overall, while the Aquarius III is fairly inexpensive for an extreme cooling solution, the fact that its performance is only a bee's pecker greater than that of our stock Intel heatsink makes it quite simply an unjustifiable purchase. What's more, while we could normally recommend a water-cooling system for those that are purely searching for an inaudible PC, the fact that the stock P4 heatsink/fan is virtually silent itself blows this argument out of the water immediately. The bottom line is, if you're looking for "extreme" cooling, you might as well go the whole nine yards and shell out for a Prometia Mach II, or search for a more hardcore watercooling system. Sorry Thermaltake, but we'll be removing this product from our testbench faster than a bride's underwear come wedding night!

Asher Moses

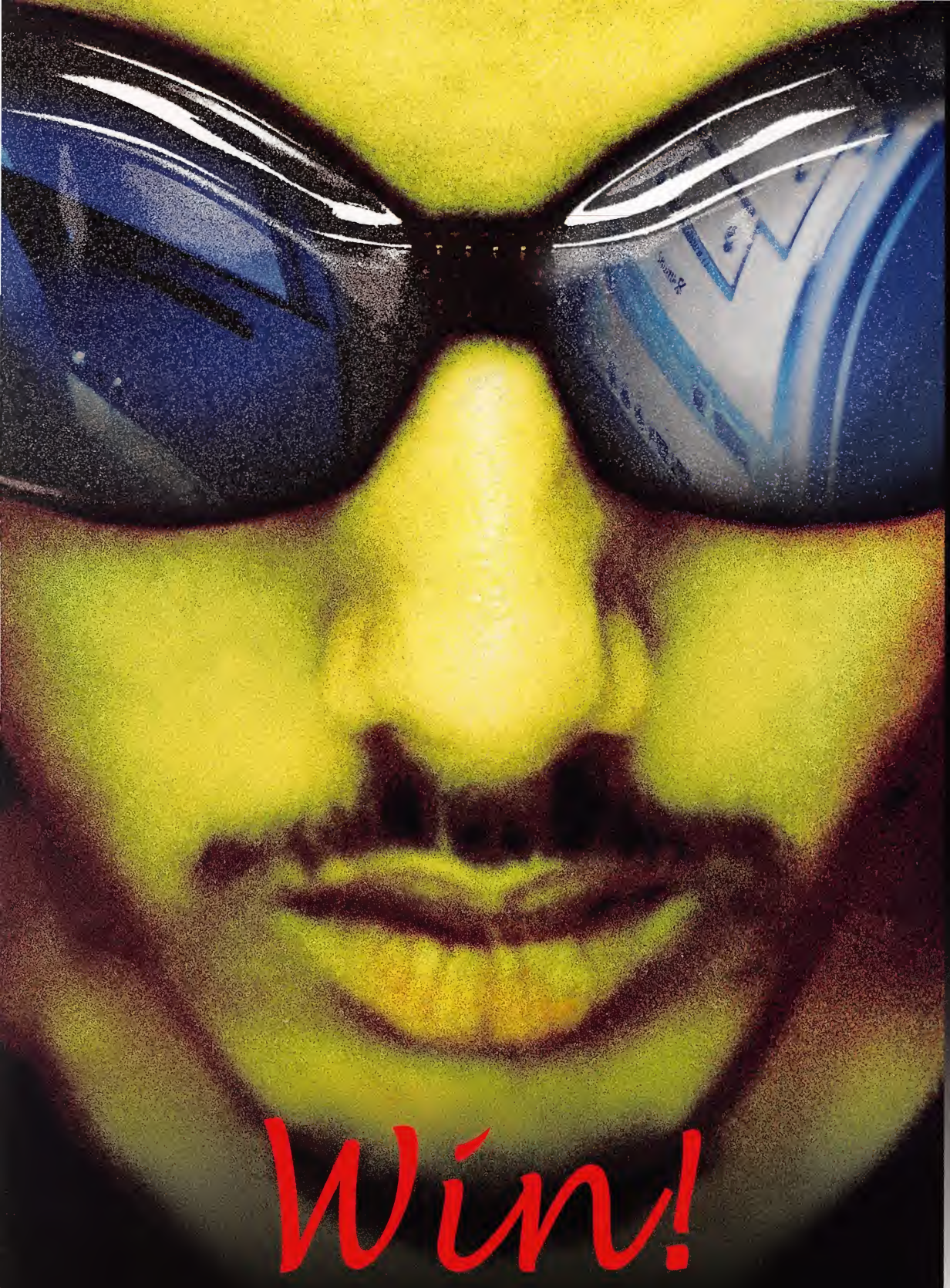
SPECIFICATIONS

- Compatibility: For Intel P4, AMD K7 & K8
- Dimensions: (d) 312mm (w) 191mm (h) 135mm
- Net Weight: 4.3 kg
- System Power consumption: 3.5-7.7 W
- Cooling Power: For 200W thermal design power
- Waterblock: Copper, 65mm x 55mm x 15.5mm, 0.54kg

PCPP Score

Only good for those who can't stand the nearly silent stock Intel cooler, and have mucho money to burn.

55



Win!

Shuttle XPC Ultimate Power LAN
Warcraft III + Unreal Tournament 2004

North Sydney ANZAC Club

Cnr Miller & Ernest St

Cammeray NSW 2062

May 1st - 9:00 AM ~ 10:00 PM

http://www.shuttle.com/ultimate

Graphics by ATi

CLGA PCMarket.com.au SATO

Xpc

Xpc

1st place
XPC ST61G4

ST61G4

2nd place
XPC SS56G

SS56G

Giveaways!

Shuttle

www.shuttle.com

Minitar MN54G4R 11g Wireless Combo

• Price: $319 • Distributor: PC Range www.pcrange.biz • URL: www.pcrange.biz

The Minitar Wireless Residential Gateway MN54G4R is based on the IEEE 802.11g wireless technology. It's an Internet routing and security device combining firewall and network management support for the home. The MN54G4R is a white plastic box with two fixed antennas, a telephone socket for broadband and four Ethernet ports. It is not an ADSL or cable modem but it supports all broadband protocols in Australia and for cable users it supports the Telstra Heartbeat. The WiFi 11g data rate of 54 Megabits per second (6.75 Megabytes per second) is a theoretical maximum. Its real-world data rate of 2-3 MB/s is, however, fine for Internet browsing, gaming and moving files of up to 30-50MB around the network. With a built-in USB Print Server the MN54G4R is a good choice for an all-in-one secure wireless router.

The real utility of WiFi is the lack of Ethernet cable requirements, especially if your place is not wired through the walls. The wired sockets and the wireless function integrate seamlessly meaning that the PC nearest the MN54G4R could be wired in but still 'talk' to the wireless computers. It provides a high enough level of security for network communications in the home. A router/firewall must have NAT (Network Address Translation), a front-end firewall that 'hides' the network from the Internet and some form of SPI (Stateful Packet Inspection) to ensure that the data being sent/received has in fact been legitimately requested. A wireless router *must* be encrypted and to this end the MN54G4R provides 128-bit encryption (WEP) and Wi-Fi Protected Access (WPA) support. The bundle also includes two wireless PCI network interface cards. The network cards' base-station antenna is detachable and is wired to the network card. This will not suit everyone but it will suit those who need to move their antenna around a bit. I was able to connect at '56Mbps' up to 10m away in the house and pretty well got '11Mbs' throughout and up the street on my Centrino notebook. This bundle does what it's advertised to do, does it well and with a minimum of fuss.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Wired Data Rates: 10/100Mbps Auto-sensing, full-duplexing
- Wireless Data Rates: 802.11b 11Mbps, 802.11g 54Mbps
- Wireless Range Indoor: 120m @ 11Mbps, 20m @ 54Mbps
- Outdoor: 170m @ 11Mbps 50M @ 54Mbps
- Four RJ-45 10/100 switched ports
- 64/128-bit encryption
- USB print server port
- IP/Port Address Forwarding
- MAC Address Forwarding
- MAC Address Associating
- DoS Prevention
- Virtual DMZ

PCPP Score

Easy to setup and cheaper than some WiFi setups but a cable/ADSL modem will be extra. **91**

TrackIR2

• Price: $189 • Distributor: PC Aviator www.pcaviator.com • URL: www.trackir.com

Oh how I yearn for Virtual Reality. Yes, I'm one of those gamers addicted to eye candy, and eye candy doesn't get any sweeter than a high resolution head mounted display piping stereoscopic images directly into your brain. Unfortunately these only exist in B-grade Sci-fi flicks and Department of Defence laboratories, but the next best thing has just hit the PC in the form of the TrackIR 2.

We checked out the original TrackIR way back in Issue 92, and the TrackIR 2 is simply an enhanced version of this beloved gadget. For those who didn't catch the original review, shame on you, but here's a quick explanation of what it does. It's basically a head tracking device that converts head movements into mouse movements. However, in flight sims that support this gadget, your head movements cause your view within the cockpit to pan around smoothly. You only need to turn your head a small amount to look in any direction, allowing you to keep your eyes on the screen.

It's not much good for anything but flight sims, so the CS freaks out there who thought it might be cool to line up your next AWP shot with a flick of the forehead can forget it. It's just not sensitive enough. But boy is it good for the virtual flyers, and there's a nice range of sims that now support it, including LO:MAC, MS FS2004 and IL2.

The main difference between the original version and the TrackIR2 is an increase in the sampling rate, from 60 times per second to 100 times per second. This has resulted in even smoother panning than the original. Having said that, if you've already got the original it's not a big enough difference to warrant an upgrade.

However, if you don't own a TrackIR and you happen to be a flight sim fan, we can't recommend this device highly enough. It's up there with a joystick as a must have item for virtual flying.

Bennett Ring

SPECIFICATIONS

- TrackIR2 unit
- One software CD-ROM installation disk
- Electronic user's manual
- 26 reflective targets

PCPP Score

If you don't play flight sims, forget about this product. If you do, there's no two ways about it - you need this product. **95**

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AUDIO with ATTITUDE!

Altec Lansing 2004 Speaker Range!
Listen to the crystal clear sounds and bone thumping bass generated by these speaker systems and you will understand why Altec Lansing is the #1 computer speaker brand in the world!

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ALTEC LANSING #1 in PC Audio & Winner of more performance awards than any other brand of computer speaker.

Just listen to this!

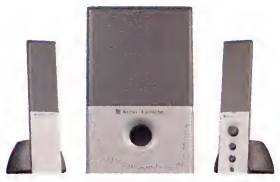
www.alteclansing.com

VS • 4121

NEW MODEL! $149.95 RRP

2.1 Clarity

- Unique, down-firing midrange driver fills the room with rich, accurate sound - you'll enjoy clear mids anywhere in the room.
- Specially engineered Micro drivers reproduce highs with thrilling clarity.
- Feel shakes and quakes from the front-firing, 6.5" long-throw subwoofer.



REVIEW COMMENT "...the Altec Lansing VS4121 system seemed the most musically-gifted of the lot." - Tom's Hardware Guide, Nov 2003

MX • 5021

NEW MODEL! $399.95 RRP

2.1 THX Certified

- Enjoy THX Certified cinema quality sound.
- Two mid-range drivers with polypropylene cones for more responsive, less distorted sound.
- Horn loaded tweeters for wider sound dispersion.
- Wireless Remote and control pod.
- Classy Piano finish exterior.

MX • 6021

NEW MODEL! $499.95 RRP

2.1 in-Concert Technology

- The fusion of pro audio line-array and tri-amp technologies, Altec Lansing's InConcert uses three seperate amplifiers to power 12 high-performance, full-range Micro Drivers. A frequency filtering system beams intense, concentrated audio straight out. You've never heard audio like this!

- Crisp, clean sound feels like it's being directed right at you, without reverb from floors and ceilings.
- Whether you're sitting in front of the speakers or several feet away, you'll hear every nuance of sound.
- Wireless Remote and Control Pod.
- Low frequency bass with a 6.5" ported subwoofer in a low-resonance wooden cabinet.
- Looks great with LCD display's and notebook screens.

Multimedia Technology · DAITRONICS CORPORATION · HiTech · Intellitron · ZEUS TECHNOLOGY · SYNNEX www.synnex.com.au · Harvey Norman · digitalblue distribution made simple

ASUS AB-P 2600 Booksize Barebone

• Price: TBA • Distributor: http://www.achieva.com.au • URL: http://www.asus.com/products/desktop/pundit/overview.htm

Before I reveal the amazing 3Dmark2001 score this product jagged, I'll clue you in about the barebone concept. It's a bit like buying a compact car without the optional extras, you know, like an engine, fuel tank, seats, etc. Well maybe not quite as bad as all that, but a similar notion anyway.

What you do get with this baby is a very stylish case, a feature rich P4 SIS based motherboard, a low wattage PSU, 1427 3Dmarks and a run of the mill CD-ROM drive. You'll need to provide the CPU, DDR memory, and a regular hard disk.

1427 3Dmarks I hear you say? I too was all set to write this off as an April fools joke until I started to notice all the other bits on this box. There's almost too many input/output thingies to count! It's got digital audio in/out, firewire ports, USB, ethernet, a 4 in 1 card reader, a PCMCIA slot, and TV Out. Ahhh, the penny drops...this is not a gaming rig, it's a glorified media centre! Well it would be if it included a remote control and a DVD drive, although you can install the latter yourself easily enough. Hook it up to your 5.1 system and you'd have a pretty good little movie player and entertainment system.

As for poking around inside, the CPU drops in easy though the heatsink is tougher. The entire drive mounting rack including the CDROM/DVD has to come out if you want to install a hard disk. Memory sits under the heatsink, so you know what that means. It would be a bit of a chore, but you're probably only going to do it once, as upgradeability is very restricted.

SPECIFICATIONS

- Weight: 7Kg fully loaded
- Dimensions: 91(w) x 357(d) x 275(h) mm
- PSU: 91(w) x 357(d) x 275(h) mm
- Memory slots: 2
- PCI slots: 2

The limited GPU will keep this off your desk, unless you source a half-decent PCI graphics card (there's no AGP slot, this machine's biggest drawback), so you can play something besides Duke Nukem3D. Actually, I did get Jedi Knight 2 running at a 'tolerable' level, but it wasn't pretty.

Even though there's no local pricing released yet, it should be a steal at not much more than the price of a decent motherboard or case. Also, even though it's an extremely dense little box, at rest the CPU hovered at 40 degrees, and full load was 52, all while remaining virtually silent and stable. But then again, how much stress can Pacman and Space invaders cause?

PCPP Score

Bargain priced and beautiful, but lacks an AGP port, which is very disappointing. For people who like to look at the silver screen, more than the blue screen.

75

Mentor RCH120 5.1 headphones

• Price: $249 • Distributor: Conexus www.conexus.com.au • URL: Mentor www.mentor3d.com

You might remember our review of the Zalman surround sound headphones a few issues back, where we concluded that while they were nice in theory, the implementation left much to be desired. Actually, that's being a little too complimentary. These craptastical headphones were horrible. Now along come the Mentor 5.1s - at almost four times the cost of the Zalmans, surely these will sound better, won't they?

These are by no means a small set of headphones, but they're quite comfortable thanks to the clever head mount and relatively light weight. A small amplifier box is mounted half way down the long headphone cable, which helps to keep the weight down. Extending from this are the front, rear and centre/sub analogue plugs, as well as a USB connection to provide power.

To test these headphones I used four songs of different genres, as well as Gladiator and Call of Duty. Let me make it clear that after completing these tests, I returned the headphones to the supplier, assuming they were broken due to the appalling sound quality. There was a constant hiss when no sound was being outputted, which varied in tone depending on what my mouse was doing. Music sounded horrible, with the high end being very distorted and 'scratchy'. A speaker test soon showed why - the smaller speakers mounted in the earpieces that are used for the rear and centre channels were terrible at outputting any kind of sound. We're talking "can on a string" sound quality. Thinking it might be a sound card issue, I tested the headphones on a Soundblaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro (the highest quality consumer card available), a Soundblaster Live!, and cheap onboard audio. There was little difference between the three. The surround effect was there, but it really wasn't much better than the faked surround effect offered by a decent EAX compatible sound card. It certainly didn't make up for the poor sound quality.

You can imagine my surprise when I received a call from the supplier the very next day, telling me that the headphones were in perfect working order. I was informed that the hissing sound is normal for any sound device, which is rather strange, as I've never heard it before in headphones, such as the Sennheisers I regularly use which sell for $100 less. Or even the $20 ear buds on my MP3 player. As a result, I can only conclude that you'd do well to avoid these headphones, especially considering the price.

Bennett Ring

SPECIFICATIONS

- Drive units: Front 40mm, Center 13mm, Surround 13mm.
- Impedance: Front 32ohm, Center 16ohm, Surround 8ohm

PCPP Score

We're sure one day 5.1 headphones will rock. Unfortunately that day is not today.

20

TDK

DVD

EVOL>E

TO TDK ARMOUR PLATED RECORDABLE DVDS

INTRODUCING THE WORLD'S FIRST DUST-PROOF, UV GUARDED, DIRT RESISTANT ARMOUR PLATED DVD EXCLUSIVELY FROM TDK. WITH 100 TIMES MORE RESISTANCE TO SCRATCHING AND WRITE/READ ERRORS THAN EVER BEFORE, THERE'S NOTHING BETTER TO PRESERVE THOSE IRREPLACEABLE PRECIOUS MEMORIES. **MP3. MUSIC. DATA. PHOTO. VIDEO. WWW.TDK.COM.AU**

Bennett Ring

Powertools

While it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools - batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new Pentium 64, or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard /memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests. Actually, we used the benchmarks that competing companies both agreed upon, to help make sure our tests can't be accused of favouring one flavour of hardware over another.

Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting hardware noobs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month. Check out the box below to see what components we use in our test benches.

CPU Tests

3D Mark03 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

Videocard tests

Aquamark 3

There ain't nothing sexier than pixel shaders baby, and this benchmark uses a wad of DX9 shaders. You can almost hear your video card squeal in pain when running this test.

3DMark2001 SE v330

An excellent DirectX 8.1 benchmark, we're still waiting for games to look this bloody good. Unlike its newer sibling, 2001SE doesn't have a reputation for being incredibly biased. We run this test at a variety of resolutions.

Halo

Considering this was a port from the NVIDIA powered Xbox, we were quite surprised to see ATI give this DX9 benchmark the thumbs up. Which is fine by us, as this is one game that will seriously test even the fastest of video cards.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test

Crank up the resolution and set the benchmark to High Quality mode, and you've got a test that will bring both ATI and NVIDIA products to their knees. This is also the test that we use for anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing tests.

TEST BENCHES

Intel Test Bench (x2) Intel Pentium 4 2.6C	AMD Test Bench (x1) AMD Athlon XP 2600+
HIS RADEON 9700 PRO www.akatech.com.au	HIS RADEON 9700 PRO www.akatech.com.au
Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL DDR400 www.altech.com.au	Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL DDR400 www.altech.com.au
Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB ATA100 Hard Drive www.seagate.com	Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB ATA100 Hard Drive www.seagate.com
ABIT IS7 865PE motherboard www.altech.com.au	ABIT NF7-S www.altech.com.au
TOPOWER 470W PSU www.auspcmarket.com.au	TOPOWER 470W PSU www.auspcmarket.com.au
Mitsubishi Diamond View 2115e 21" monitor www.mitsubishi.com.au	Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond View 2115e 21" monitor www.mitsubishi.com
Microsoft multimedia keyboard and optical mouse www.microsoft.com.au	Microsoft multimedia keyboard and optical mouse www.microsoft.com.au
Windows XP Professional www.microsoft.com.au	Windows XP Professional www.microsoft.com.au

Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.

www.akatech.com.au

www.corsairmicro.com

www.auspcmarket.com.au

www.intel.com

www.abit.com.tw

www.amd.com

www.seagate.com

www.hightech.com.hk

www.altech.com.au

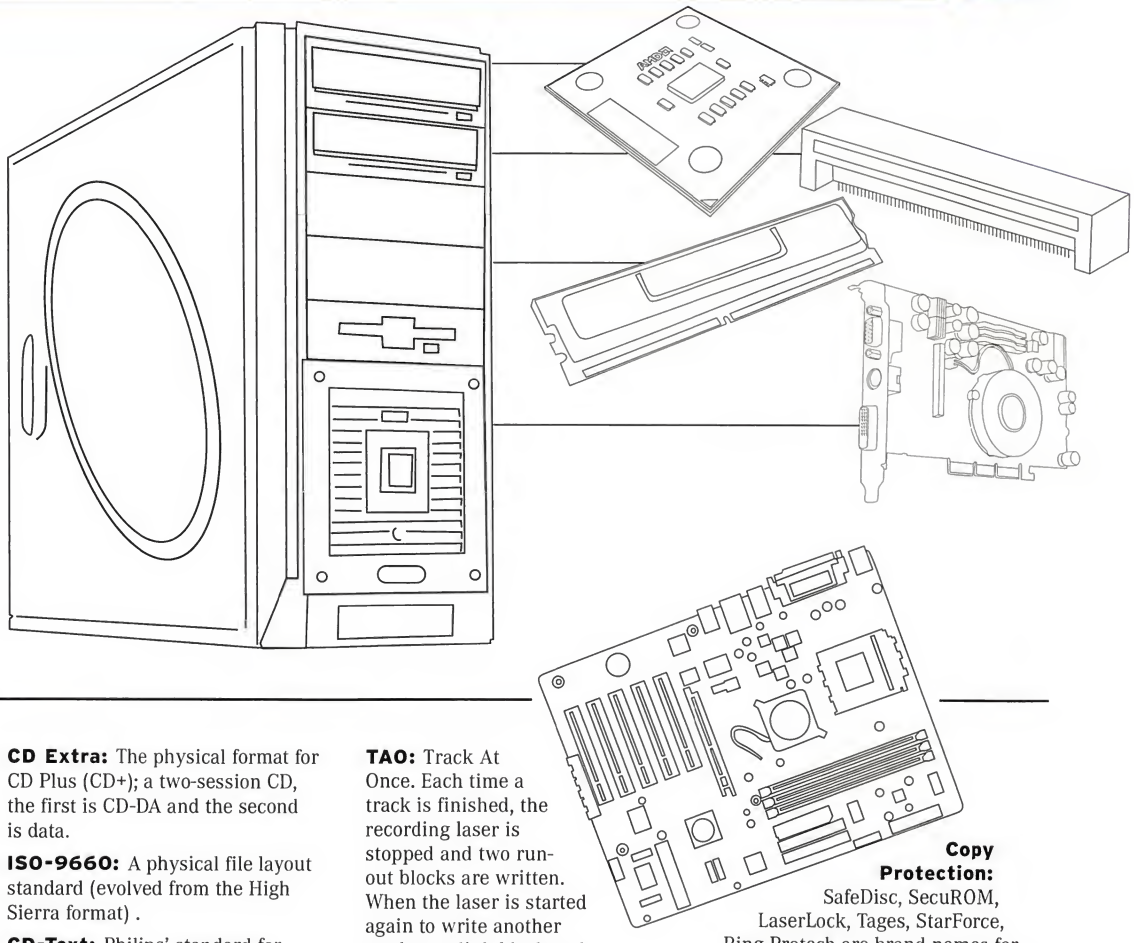
www.sony.com.au

www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au

Stuart Calvin

Decrypt

A reliable CD burner is indispensable for a myriad of reasons. Anything can be burnt to a CD - provided it's no bigger than around 620MB that is. From moving files around to backing up precious CDs and long term storage, it beats a floppy hands down.



CD: Compact Disc.

CD-ROM: Compact Disc Read Only Memory.

CD-R: Compact Disc Recordable.

CD-RW: Compact Disc Rewriteable.

Coaster: A burnt CD that didn't quite work out.

Coloured Books: CD standards developed by Dutch electronics giant Philips.

Red Book: The physical format for audio CDs or CD-DA (CD-Digital Audio).

Yellow Book: The physical format for data CDs; **MODE-1:** standard 2048-byte Yellow Book sectors, with error correction code (ECC); **MODE-2:** 2336-byte sectors, usually used for CD-ROM/XA.

CD-ROM/XA: eXtended Architecture is an extension to the Yellow Book Mode 2 standard. It was intended as a bridge between CD-ROM and CD-i (Green Book).CD-ROM/XA MODE-2 defines two forms: **FORM-1** 2048 bytes of data, with ECC, for data; **FORM-2** 2324 bytes of data, no ECC, for audio/video.

Green Book: The physical format for CD Interactive or CD-i.

Orange Book: The physical format for recordable CDs. **Part I** CD-MO (Magneto-Optical); **Part II** CD-WO (Write-Once; includes the "hybrid" specification for PhotoCD); **Part III** CD-RW.

White Book: The physical format for VCD or VideoCD.

Blue Book: The physical format for CD Extra.

CD Extra: The physical format for CD Plus (CD+); a two-session CD, the first is CD-DA and the second is data.

ISO-9660: A physical file layout standard (evolved from the High Sierra format) .

CD-Text: Philips' standard for encoding track information on CD-DA.

CD-ROM (UDF): Universal Disc Format. A file system endorsed by OSTA (the Optical Storage Technology Association) for use with incremental or packet writing (just like a floppy diskette).

CD-ROM (ISO): Depending on who you're talking to, "ISO" may refer to all disc image files or only certain kinds. Strictly speaking, ISO defines a file format and not a disc image format. In Nero, for example, it means that you want to burn a data disc.

1x: Burning 650MB of data takes about 74 minutes at 1x or 150 Kilobytes per second. An 80 minute disc can contain 700MB of data. A 52x recorder can write a full 52x compatible CD recordable in under two minutes.

VCD: Video CD. VCD discs can contain 74 minutes of MPEG-1 video and audio.

SVCD: Super Video CD. SVCD discs can be used to deliver 35-40 minutes of MPEG-2 format karaoke or music videos, movies, home videos, still-image slide shows and games. They are easy to make at home and follow the CD-ROM/XA physical format.

TAO: Track At Once. Each time a track is finished, the recording laser is stopped and two run-out blocks are written. When the laser is started again to write another track, one link block and four run-in blocks are written. In some audio players you might hear a click when the link and run blocks are encountered between tracks.

DAO: Disc At Once. In DAO mode, all tracks are recorded without ever stopping the laser, and the disc is closed. Hence no link blocks and no clicks. When recording audio discs, you will be able to control the length of the 'pauses' between tracks (or eliminate them completely).

SAO: Session At Once. SAO recording is used on some CD Extra discs. With SAO, an audio session is written without inter-track gaps, just as though it were DAO. The difference is that only the session is closed, so one or more additional sessions can be written. Since an audio player can only see the first session of a disc, it makes no sense to write audio after SAO (unless you want to play the disc only on your computer).

Cloners: Programs such as CloneCD, Alcohol 120%, Blindwrite, GameJack (Google is your friend) allow you to copy or backup original CDs.

Pre-Masterers: Programs such as DiscJuggler, Nero and EZ CD Creator enable you to create CD compilations according to most of the Coloured Book standards.

Copy Protection: SafeDisc, SecuROM, LaserLock, Tages, StarForce, Ring Protech are brand-names for anti-copying measures. While you might be legally entitled to back up your CD, no one says it had to be easy!

Pits/Lands: Found only on original CDs there are raised and lowered areas, referred to as "lands" and "pits", respectively. Combinations and lengths of pits and lands represent the ones and zeros of digital information.

Pressed Originals: Original CDs are pressed by machines, not burnt. A pressed CD can contain copy protection information beyond coloured book parameters so that reader/writers can't copy them.

Regular Bit Patterns: Fact is, most burners can't write regular patterns of ones and zeros (they choke and stop burning) but these patterns occur as part of SafeDisc copy protection.

EFM: Eight To Fourteen Modulation. This how the chipset in the burner works out how to burn the data correctly onto a CD recordable.

Correct EFM Encoding of Regular Bit Patterns: A capability found in LITE-ON, ASUS, LG (GCE model) CD burners that can encode and write the patterns correctly. This is crucial for backing up SafeDisc protected CDs.

THE BEAST

In association with Altech Computers

ALTECH Computers

Welcome to PCPP's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness and/or level of technical knowledge.
For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege.
Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.

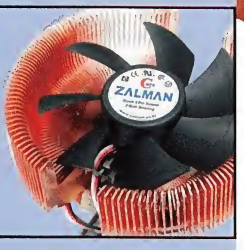
CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

AMD Athlon FX-51 CPU
Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-51 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon.
$1258 www.amd.com

Asus SK8N
Yep, it's one incredibly expensive motherboard, but that's what you have to put up with when you want the best of the best. At least you'll know that it's of the highest quality.
$412 www.asus.com.tw

1GB Corsair TWINX-3200LL ECC Registered
The FX-51 demands only the finest in registered memory, and a Gig of the stuff for a mere $560 is quite simply a bargain. It's Corsair as well, so it must be pretty good, right?
$560 www.corsairmemory.com

Zalman 7000A-Cu
The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.
$79 www.zalman.co.kr

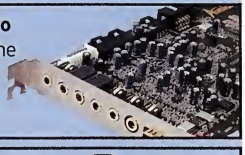


Antec TruePower 550W
With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.
$200 www.antec-inc.com

VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

XpertVision RADEON 9800XT PRO 256MB
With more onboard memory than some people's whole PC, the latest in the RADEON family will get your FSAA performance up and keep it up.
$770 www.xpertvision.com.tw

Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro
The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including Dolby 6.1 surround.
$499 australia.creative.com



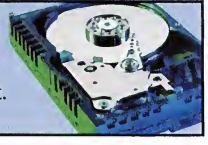
Logitech Z680
Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these Power Award winning speakers into the ports on the back. You've never heard PC speakers like these.
$699 www.logitech.com.au

STORAGE AND OPTICAL

Sony DRU510A DVD +/- R/RW
Almost but not quite cheap enough for mere mortals to own, this Sony drive will burn DVDs and CDs at 4X and 24X respectively - tasty!
$299 www.sony.com.au

Samsung 816BRPS 16x DVD-ROM
It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up - DVDs using your nifty writer.
$62 www.samsung.com.au

2x Western Digital 74GB Raptor WD740D RAID 0
Sure, they're not the biggest hard drives on the planet, but they're arguably the fastest. And with a name like Raptor, it's obvious they were created just for our Beast.
$860 www.westerndigital.com



DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

17" Samsung 172x
It's might only be a 17" monitor, but it has the viewable area of a 19" CRT, at a fraction of the size. Blurring is a thing of the past due to the 12ms response time.
$900 www.samsung.com.au

MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack
Keyboards and mice don't get much snazzier than this delectable combo.
$210 www.microsoft.com.au

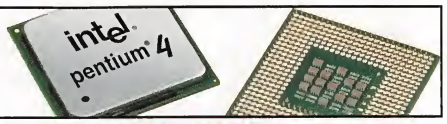
Antec P160
This beast of a case is perfect for a beast of a PC. A couple of temperature guages on the front make it perfect for letting you know when your system is about to explode.
$250 www.antec-inc.com

BEAST VALUE: $7058

THE MUTANT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for not much outlay. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

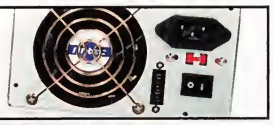
Intel P4 2.6GHz "C" at 3.3GHz
Truly the most overclockable of all modern CPUs, the 2.6C can be run a staggering 700MHz over its stock speed. With the standard Intel HSF. Now that's value.
$300 www.intel.com



Abit AI7
An 865PE based mobo from Abit, the AI7 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again.
$195 www.abit.com.tw

MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack
Sure, this combo isn't exactly cheap, but you can't skimp on the interface between you and your box of love. And it's all wireless, making it perfect to use from the comfort of your couch.
$257 www.microsoft.com.au

Antec TrueControl 550W
What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with a 5.25" front plate with dials and knobs for controlling fan speed plastered all over it? Nothing, that's what.
$210 www.antec-inc.com

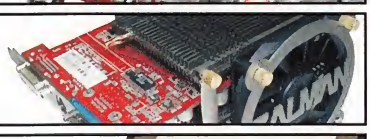


Antec PlusView 1000AMG
An excellent pre-modded case, with more than enough fan mounts to keep your oc'd system nice and chillin'. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window.
$171 www.antec.inc.com

1GB Corsair TWINX-3200C2
Damn memory is getting cheap. Who'd have thought a year ago that you could now pick up a gig of rediculously fast DDR-RAM for a mere $377? Not us, that's for sure.
$377 www.corsairmemory.com

XpertVision RADEON 9800XT
Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Mutant. It's hard to believe that you can now get a RADEON 9800XT for a mere $770, considering just how blazingly fast this video card is.
$770 www.xpertvision..com.tw

Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP
Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve?
$68 www.zalman.co.kr



120GB Seagate IDE
The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost $447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we can't complain.
$146 www.seagate.com

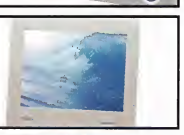
Creative SB Audigy
Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost.
$129 australia.creative.com

Creative Inspire 6.1 6600
They're so cheap they're good enough for the Mutant too. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of extraordinary speakers.
$249 australia.creative.com

Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM
Same as the Beast, this drive is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available.
$62 www.samsung.com.au

Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW
Wow, these things sure got cheap didn't they? Burn CDs in hardly any time at all thanks to 52x writing. Backup all your digital LAN shots for posterity. Pose nude... no wait, don't.
$59 www.samsung.com.au

19" Samsung 995 Dynaflat
Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we can't wait until a 16ms LCD this big costs this much.
$545 www.samsung.com.au



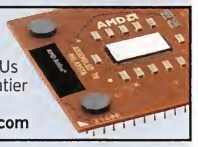
4x Antec Internal Illuminate
Pep up the Mutant with a few light sticks. Stick 'em on the monitor, in the case, wherever you like. USB powered and respond to sound - clap on, clap off! Other cosmetic additions to the Creature are limited only by your imagination..
$176 www.antec-inc.com

MUTANT VALUE: $3665

the beastie

The cheapest but worthiest PC of all, the Beastie is for all of us who need gaming, the web and to generally have fun without worrying about overclocking or our bank account.

AMD -Athon XP 2500+ Barton
The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier
$146 www.amd.com

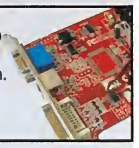


Abit NF7
nForce2 is good and this implementation of it is even better
www.abit.com.tw $132

Antec Lanboy
Includes a 350W power supply, window and carry strap.
$180
www.antec.inc.com

512MB Corsair PC-3200
A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market.
$220
www.corsairmemory.com

GeCube RADEON 9800
Yes, a 9800 in a budget system. Holy shit batman.
$445 Available from www.emagen.com.au



80GB Seagate IDE
Plenty of room for not much cash. Dependable and reliable.
$110
www.seagate.com

Creative Inspire 2500 2.1
Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic!
$119
australia.creative.com

Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM
Good enough for all the PCs on this page, swift and reliable.
$62
www.samsung.com.au

Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW
Cheap, fast, reliable, what more could you want from a CD-RW?
$59 ww.samsung.com.au

17" Samsung SyncMaster 753S
To think 17" monitors were once worth $800. I love the technology of the future.
$226 www.samsung.com.au

MS Internet Value Pack
Not content with owning your OS world, M$ are now ruling the I/O roost.
$64 www.kmepc.com

beastie value: $1763

So, you want one of these three fine beasts? Luckily, all of these components are available at
Altech Computers
www.altech.com.au
02 9735 5655

ALTECH Computers

STUART CALVIN WAXES TECHNICAL

SETUP

WRITE TO SETUP AT:

Setup
PC Powerplay
78 Renwick St
Redfern
NSW 2016

setup@pcpowerplay.com.au

A WASTE OF MONEY?

Q I recently purchased an Athlon 2400+, a Radeon Excalibur 9800PRO, a new motherboard and a better power supply (all of which cost too bloody much!). So here I am expecting blistering performance when the first game I play is Splintercell which surprisingly runs slow on any resolution, the same goes for GTA III. When I run a UT2K3 on 1024x768 benchmark I get an average frame rate of 40. Also when playing HalfLife I keep getting a message saying my OpenGL mode is not compliant however the game runs fine. Is there any particular way to setup my card in the options (its set to balanced) because I can't help but feel ripped off! PLEASE HELP ME!

gf-sports

A I'm not sure what you mean by "slow" but Anti-Aliasing in Splinter Cell has had its problems and GTA III runs like a dog anyway. The fact that more than one game is proving frustrating points to a problematic sub-sytem. This could be incorrectly installed chipset drivers which support and optimise the CPU, RAM and AGP buses as well as the IDE controllers. Run and checkout dx.diag for corrupted DirectX files. You should be using the latest Catalyst driver set, which supports DirectX 9.x and OpenGL 1.4. Update your sound card drivers while you're at it. Switch all AA and AF settings in the software driver to "application controlled" and set up these features within each game. If you have a cheapy sound card, you will take a frame rate hit when using in-game EAX, and how much of a hit depends on CPU power. Try running a benchmark like 3DMark2001SE, and then comparing the score with similar systems via the online result browser. Oh yeah - you did a full reformat and new install of Windows after installing a new motherboard, didn't you?!?

MOUSE BALLS

Q I have a problem with my mouse; it's a standard HP PS/2 ball mouse that you would find almost everywhere and it has a mind of its own and likes to move up and down, not left or right on its own. Why? And how do I stop it? If you must know I'm running an AMD Athlon XP 2100+ at 2.2GHz, 512MB RAM, and a lousy EPoX 8K3A+ mobo.

Morpheus

A You duffer klutz. Although a 'broken' mouse driver is not infrequent, more common is accumulated gunk on the internal rollers – y'know, from pizza, chocolate, belly button fluff, and/or dandruff. Undo the ball housing, drop the ball out and inspect the plastic rollers that contact the ball. Have a pair of tweezers handy to carefully and gently scrape off the gunk. Still no good? Sell it to someone you don't like.

CERTIFIABLE

Q I've been having troubles with my ATi 9600Pro. During gameplay it drops out, freezes, and restarts. The Catalyst 3.9 drivers used have no effect, nor does the return to 3.7 like you suggested in previous issues. DirectX says they are not certified drivers. Have used Win98/98SE, Win2K and WinXP with no improvements, even on a fresh install.

9600 flop

A A format and fresh install? It's not unknown for a new card to fritz early on. My first Ti4200 lasted two weeks before the dual head went to heaven. If you can, try swapping the card into another machine. AGP adaptors are sensitive to other hardware problems such as failing RAM and an overheating CPU (game engines do pass geometry calculations onto the CPU). Practically any chronic or intermittent problem will play havoc with graphics. Got a small, stuffy, dusty case? Got enough cooling fans? Take off the side cover, vacuum the inside, direct a desk fan onto its guts and see if it still plays up.

DEUS CRASH

Q I've just installed the much anticipated Deus Ex - Invisible War: Three times on Win98, Win2K, WinMe and WinXP. The installation is seamless but when I open the game a "message" is put in front of me. It's not the same errors either, on XP it comes an error report, on 2000 it says "DX2.exe has generated errors and will be closed by Windows. Bugger you, I don't care that you forked out $90 for 3 months respite. You will need to restart the program." In Win98 it says very much the same thing. I don't really care how but, short of buying a new PC could you tell me how to get Deus Ex 2 to work??

Jonathan

A Does your PC satisfy the minimum requirements? It's no good playing this game on anything less than a 64MB GeForce 4 video adaptor powered by an Athlon XP Thoroughbred or Pentium 4 CPU for a start (maybe a 1000MHz PIII at a pinch). Surf over to http://forums.eidosgames.com/ for some help on known issues. If the game is crashing while you're loading it, and/or maps take a long time to load and the game eventually crashes, the problem might be related to disc access times, try updating your CD/DVD drive firmware from the manufacturer's website. Run Windows at the same resolution you're running the game at. For example, if you're running the game at 800x600, put your Windows resolution at 800x600. Some players have had problems when installing the game to a custom directory. Try installing the game to the installer's default directory. This has worked for some people, though obviously it's not ideal. Lastly, join the forums and wait for a patch.

DIRECTXPLAIN?

Q I recently got Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, and installed it, only to find that it needed Direct X 9.0b to run. No big deal, I just said yes to installing it off of the CD. (I previously had DX9.0a). However, when it got to the stage of installation where it said

Don't you love this month's pictorial analogy representing a performance difference?

"copying files", WinXP told me that it hadn't passed Windows Logo Testing, and that it wouldn't install. I've told the driver signing control panel to ignore drivers that 'hadn't passed' but it still gives me the message and won't let me install. I've tried the DX9.0b on the KOTOR CD, and on several of your "PCPowerPlay DVDs, but they all give the same message. I've also tried installing DX9.0b over the net through the Microsoft website, but that kept stuffing up (random error messages, e.g. one of those shutdown in 60s screens). I'm in year 12 this year and want to spend what little time I have on the computer for playing games, not fixing problems. Please help!!!

Paul M

A How about considering a "format c:\ /u /s" solution? If it's as bad as you say then I suspect your hard drive is filled with rogue and conflicting virtual device drivers, dynamic libraries and other malodorous mischievous miscellany. Try Microsoft's on-line resource centre for DirectX http://www.microsoft.com/windows/directx/default.aspx?url=/windows/directx/support/default.htm for any help. Use this link to access DirectX downloads http://www.microsoft.com/windows/Directx/ and there's a FAQ here http://www.microsoft.com/windows/directx/productinfo/faq/default.htm

NEED FOR SPEED

Q I would like to know if the performance difference between the Athlon XP3000 and the Athlon XP3200 is great enough to warrant purchasing a new motherboard. If so, which motherboard would you recommend?

Royce Stewart

A In a word – hell no. There's a bee's dick or a gnat's nut between the two CPUs, and the move to a faster front side bus won't make much of a difference. If you currently own the Athlon 64, you're much better off waiting until the end of the year to upgrade. By then the Athlon 64s will be more affordable, and the new Socket 939 motherboards will be well established.

CREATIVE SPECS

Q Last year I got myself a fantastic 5.1 sound system for my computer and Home Theatre. The advert for the Audigy 2 ZS looked promising, as Creative claim that it can do 5.1 digital, Dolby, DTS, EAX 4, and nearly every other sound format you could imagine. But it was all too good to be true. I received only two channel sound. My supplier told me that the problem was common, and that it was an obscure setting. I asked Creative whether or not the card could actually perform as advertised and I got a short apology for the "gimmick" in their advert where they omitted the fact that the digital output's 5.1 is for DVDs only. I just thought that you might like to hear of this underhanded swindling that wasted more than $200 and much of my time.

Richard Taylor

A You can still achieve 6 channel in-game sound, of sorts, by using the Creative Software Mixer. Give it a try. But yeah, this sucks.

PERSISTANT OC

Q My sys specs are Pentium 2.4B, Albatron FX5600EP, a gig of dual channel DDR400 on a GA-8IPE1000. The things I've upgraded were a GeForce 4 440 MX graphics card, 512MB of DDR266 RAM and a GA-845E. Before the upgrade I was using NVTweak. It showed the clock frequencies and the core clock frequency were always 270MHz and the memory clock frequency 266MHz. Even though I've upgraded my comp to that new mobo and that 1 gig of RAM it still has those clock frequencies! What is wrong with it? Games like HALO lag like anything when I put it on 800x600 with everything on high. I've also upgraded the Detonators to the latest 53.03, and it only got worse. Prince of Persia: Sands of Time was kinda slow, meaning when I move my mouse or the keyboard half a sec later it responds. What do I do?

Andrew Ie

A It's the motherboard chipset that determines supported components and their combinations. Intel's 865PE MCH North Bridge on your GA-8IPE1000 supports a 400/533/800 MHz Front Side Bus and dual channel 266/333/400 MHz DDR RAM speed. OK, no problems here so far. However, the supported FSB/Memory configurations do not include 533/400 MHz such as you have. You could decide to upgrade to a P4 2.8C (around $250) or accept the fact that the DDR400 has been notched back to 333MHz and the possibility of continuing instability. The major problem is the damage that NVTweak has caused. Before you uninstall it, fire it up and restore the standard 325MHz core and 400MHz memory frequency values for your FX5600EP. If that doesn't work, uninstall it anyway and try RivaTuner from www.guru3d.com/rivatuner/. By the way, you did do a full reinstall of Windows when you installed the new motherboard, didn't you?

GHOST IN THE RAID

Q I have an Athlon 2600+, a GA-7N400Pro 2, 512MB DDR RAM, a 5600FX GF card, and a Live! 5.1 sound card. I have two 7200rpm 80GB Maxtors in RAID0. Can I put another hard drive in and setup Ghost on it to ghost the C drive that is running RAID0? Or will it cause me more hair pulling because I have none left from building the f***en thing but if you can help me and I can ghost my machine, that makes it so much easier when shit hits the fan to get it back to stable environment.

Stewie

A The 7N400 Pro 2 is a very good choice for gamers, I have one, if you can put up with the cries of derision from VIA and Intel fAn boyz. You can run four parallel drives, as master/slave, off IDE #0 and #1 (or 1 & 2 in normal-speak). The Maxtor RAID0 (on #2) still leaves you with one RAID port (#3) to connect two more drives in JABOD (just a bunch of disks). But, you also have two Serial ATA ports to run RAID0 and "Base" in Gigabyte-speak (more JABOD). Setting up an IDE JABOD with existing RAID0 can be done but it's more of a pain than adding in a S-ATA disk. Surf over to www.razorprices.com and search for a cheapy S-ATA drive. $200 says you'll get at least 120GB if not 160GB. Personally, I prefer DriveImage, latterly from PowerQuest, now from Symantec.

XtremeOverclockers
Viper1337- as pictured left. CPU: Pentium4 - 2.6Ghz at 3.1Ghz
17" Samsung 172n TFT. Case, K/Board, Mouse: Thermaltake Lanfire
Asus Radeon 9800XT 256mb. - Modem, Speakers, CD-RW, DVD-ROM
Ram: Crosair Twin-X DDR PC3200 512mb Low Lat. Kit. Win XP-Pro
HDD: Dual 80GB SATA Drives in Raid-0, 160GB Superfast Retrieval.
Asus P4C800DXE. Gamers Dream PC, Built by serious Gamers.
InfernoPC. CPU: Amd Athlon 2.5Ghz at 3.1Ghz.
Screen: Samsung 753dfx 17inch CRT. Case: Vtech (dual neons)
Video: Asus 9600XT 128mb. Ram: KingstonDDR 256mb PC3200
Hard Disk: 80GB 7200rpm ATA Drive. Windows XP Home.
Mainboard: Asus A7V8X. Modem, Speakers, DVD-ROM.
SAME PC AS WE USE IN OUR LAN CENTRES!
Go even faster, Water Cooling Available!
WWW.BATTLEZONE.COM.AU ::: CALL 1300 137 209

The Hub

ULTIMA HEADS EAST

Fresh from closing down its Origin studio, Electronic Arts has somewhat allayed fans' fears by announcing a new expansion pack for Ultima Online, the former studio's only surviving project. The hook this time is a new Asian environment, presumably as part of an effort to tap into the massive Korean and Chinese markets.

Army Goes There

Let's Model the World

It looks like the American Army is going to get into the swing of the massively multiplayer genre. The developers of MMORPG There are hard at work making a persistent online training environment on a massive scale. This is a long-term project and There Inc. is aiming for global proportions. So far, only the down-town section of Kuwait city has been modelled but a prototype version capable of some training missions should be running by September.

The city environment can already handle a "massive number of people" and There Inc already have in details like women in abayas walking down the street talking and gesturing with each other. It seems like the Army is looking for a tool which will allow a commander of a unit to request certain training scenarios and then have missions modified or created to meet their specific needs.

Since the environment would be persistent and multi-user, you could have several organisations or group participating in the training, on several fronts, at the same time as well as simulating the responses of groups like the UN and Red Cross as well as hostiles.

The simulation will be used for more than just straight war games, and there will even be role-playing aspects.

The software will also come with powerful organisational and analytical tools so that soldiers can be de-briefed and rated on their in-field performances in much more meaningful ways than getting +1 rifle skill and some platinum pieces. The game will concentrate on human interaction over that of armour and vehicle combat and There Inc is working with soldiers and the Army Research Institute to refine how the massively multi-user platform will be best used. A commercial release for this thing isn't planned at the moment but There Inc hasn't ruled it out.

Uru and Mythica No More

MMORPGs Calling it a Day

It has been announced that Microsoft's Mythica and Ubi Soft's Uru: Live have both been canned. Microsoft Game's Studio Manager says that it dropped the game because "after careful evaluation of the MMORPG landscape, MGS has decided to stream-line its portfolio, making fewer investments in this genre. After a rigorous review of current and future projects, the decision was made that Mythica would not be one of the projects we would continue to invest in."

This comes after Microsoft unloaded Asheron's Call by selling it back to its developer, leaving an announced game by Sigil Entertainment it's only "current and future project" in the field of PC online worlds. Sigil was founded by two guys who helped create EverQuest, so it will be interesting to see what they have cooking.

Uru: Live on the other hand was cancelled due to lack of interest. Ubi Soft says that it was cancelled because of a lack of subscriptions. Uru Live was integrated into the single player game Ages Beyond Myst, and the material slated as being new parts of the online world are now to become expansions for the single player game.

What we can't understand about this one is why would you go as far as to integrate the MMORPG game into your single player package, offer easy links to help new player transition to the online world, target the casual Myst audience and then make the game broadband only?

Then, after opening servers and launching extensive guidance websites why would you cancel the online component before it has a chance to build a community or offers any real content to entice players? It would seem that both Microsoft and Ubi Soft have read the increasing amount of market analysis and decided to cut their riskier projects and keep their sights firmly on established demographics.

A New Breed of Jedi

SWG Cuts them Some Slack

It seems death isn't the same barrier it once was for Jedi in Star Wars Galaxies. The system to control Jedi used to be one of the most interesting and brutal that we'd seen in MMORPGs. Not only was the path to become a Jedi secret, but once your Jedi fell there was no re-spawning.

It would seem that too many players put in too much effort into their coolest character in a blaze of crap, so the system is in for an overhaul. Now death isn't such an obstacle, with players being allowed to die between 3 and 5 times (depending on their level) before losing their Jedi skill points. Naturally, the further along the Jedi path, the more punishing the revocation will be.

Your death count will also creep back towards zero with each week that character stays upright and the impact of skill point loss is mitigated by the fact that players will be able to choose what goes first.

Perma-death is an interesting concept in MMO games but it's really hard to make it fun. So much work goes into each high-end character and to have it removed from your roster, maybe because of a few seconds of lag, is pretty harsh.

New Frontiers Announced

Free Expansion for DAoC

If you were starting to think the Realm Wars in Dark Age of Camelot were starting to get a bit stale, then you're not alone and Mythic has the answer.

It has just officially announced the expansion called New Frontiers, which just happened to be a new, free, expansion.

Realm battles are going to get more intense, wars are going to be more accessible to players and the team is adding a more "concrete rewards system" for RvR combat.

Now each keep will have ten levels of upgrades and players will have the option of battering down walls instead of going through guarded doorways. Want to draw out enemies? Well, lob rocks at their walls from your catapults.

To keep things moving players will now be able to teleport between chains of secure keeps and player-controlled boats are being added for fast moving, rapid deployments.

To make things more intense all three frontier realms will now share one map packed with geography designed to provide tactical bottle-necks, cover and surprise approaches.

Finally the RvR rewards are getting such a shake up that all players will have their realm points refunded to them. This will allow them to have educated picks from the rebalanced, and retooled, Realm Abilities which gel better with the rest of the New Frontier updates.

New Frontiers is scheduled for a 2nd quarter release so look for it in the coming months.

BLAME THE ALIENS

Anarchy Online, the gorgeous looking but bug-ridden MMO that is reportedly quite good now many of the bugs have been quashed, is due an add-on. Rewarding the hardcore players for their patience, the Alien Invasion expansion allows the construction of towns and shops in preparation for having them destroyed by the eponymous alien invasion.

Brat Goes Solar

Alternative Energy Source Battlefields

While gamers are waiting for Brat Design's first game – the sci-fi shooter, Breed – to hit shelves the developer has announced that its next project will be Solar Campaigns. Okay, imagine the grim sci-fi setting and then add "battlefield" to the title.

The central thrust of the game will be sprawling battle grounds populated by up to 32 players. The single-player missions will use the multiplayer maps; you'll have bots to contend with instead of real people.

Solar will feature two rival factions (East versus West) complete with their own weapons and vehicles with battles being fought on land, on sea and in the air. Besides these two, playable, army factions, there will also be the Necros … a bunch of deadites out to ruin everyone's day. The twist comes in the fact that the factions will be able to influence the Necros – like some creepy zombified resource – and sick them on their foes.

Beyond all this you also have weapons of mass destruction, orbital lasers, air strikes, buildings that crumble and terrain that can be blasted away. The Moon, Mars and Earth will all feature campaigns and all of the whacky missions like retrieval, VIP escort, recon, sabotage as well as search and destroy, last man standing, CTF and king of the hill will come to the party.

I wonder if Brat Designs spat chips when they saw the announcement for Star Wars: Battlefront?

Sphere

Do the Russians Love Their MMO Too?

Are you sick and tired of having to wait months to get the latest MMORPG here, and then having to play on US servers? Well, spare a thought for our Russian gaming brothers and sisters.

The development of an all-Russian massively multiplayer game, Sphere, has highlighted some of the interesting technical problems behind such a venture. For one, forget broadband, you have to make games for telephone lines that barely manage a dial tone.

Then you have the problem that very few Russian actually have a credit card to charge. Through Russian perseverance it seems the makes of Sphere have managed to get it to work as they have managed to snag 15,000 subscribers in their first three months.

Hundreds of guilds have also sprung up including ones which insist that the USA is really the main portal for demonic influence…

Equilibris

For: Heroes of Might and Magic 4 ■ **URL:** www.zone.ee/homm4/eng/news.html ■ **Size:** 2Mb ■ **Score:** 5/5

PC PowerPlay HIGH DISTINCTION PC PowerPlay

Heroes of Might & Magic 4 is one of the most popular turn-based adventure titles of late. It's a game with many strengths, but to the frustration of many, it also has some crippling bugs and balance issues. These were of such a sewerage pedigree that players have even uploaded their saves to the web, illustrating the impossible situations the game placed them in.

It seemed the longer you played, the more likely something horrible and ungodly would happen to your player. Facing enemies with 100% physical damage resistance, monsters that can't be damaged with magic, utterly useless spells or abilities and other outrageous errors caused many to despair. Simple, you're saying – there'll be a patch soon from the developers, right? This is one of those unfortunate situations where the development team was disbanded before they could get a chance to fix the problems.

Now usually this spells the end of the road for the game, leaving its frustrated fans to move on to better things or start drinking cocktails made from unrefined solvents. Here's where our plucky mod developers come in. A crew of Russians has created a simple code mod to address the issues and imbalances of the retail game. And it works, spectacularly so. The team is continually balancing and improving the many spells, creatures, artifacts and bonuses which were so awfully broken before. In the absence of proper tools, they've cheerfully repaired the game, a giant task, and then gone on to add many fun new additions.

Looking at the history of abandoned games with harrowing issues, this is one tale that got set to rights – and it was the community that rose to the challenge. There's a message in there somewhere.

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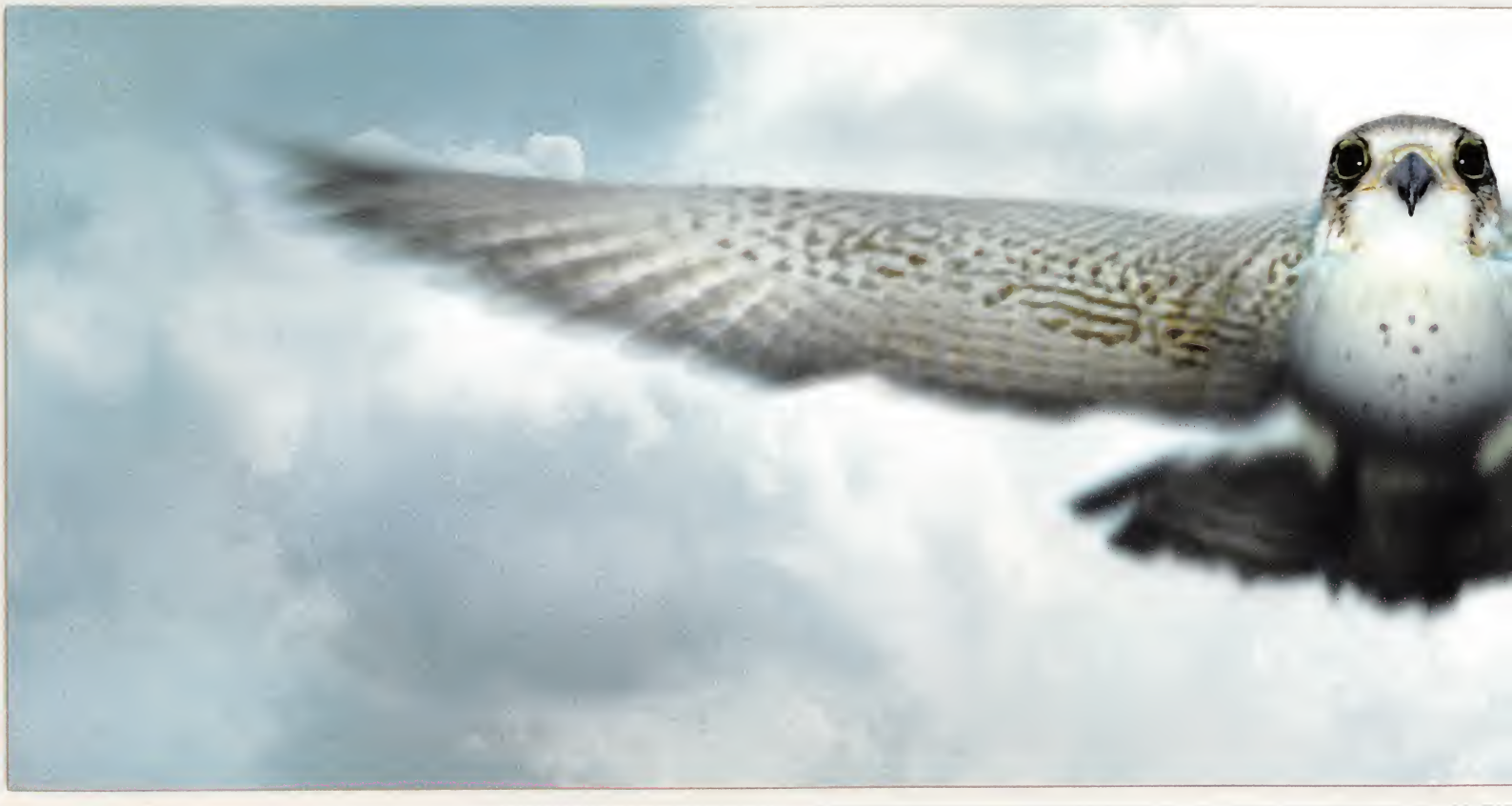

Natural Selection

For: Half Life ■ **URL:** www.natural-selection.org ■ **Size:** 158MB ■ **Score:** 4/5

PC PowerPlay DISTINCTION PC PowerPlay

First-person-strategy has been a risky buzzword for some time now, mostly centred around discussions of the as-yet-vapourware Team Fortress 2. The general idea is that you've got one player commanding with a top-down strategic interface, while the grunts and peons are actually live players, who can follow instructions and improvise to deal with evolving situations. Natural Selection is just that - set in a world vaguely resembling Aliens Versus Predator, without the Predator. Players join the Alien or Marine teams and try to destroy each other's base.

In a cute twist, only the Marine team has a "strategic commander" option, directing the actions of his force. The aliens instead have immense power vested within each individual, to compensate for the probable advantage the Marines get through teamwork. The Marines have limited ammunition and must return to structures to restock, while Aliens have an unlimited supply of resources that originates within themselves. This is quite an in-depth project, with the ability to build structures (Marines) and evolve yourself (Aliens) to gain ever more powerful abilities.

The largest Aliens resemble twisted hippos and their bases are these fantastic hanging cocoons and slimy looking behemoths. The maps tend to have a very claustrophobic scale, allowing for many ventilation ducts, trenches, crevices and similar devices to allow the wall-clinging Aliens to launch surprise attacks.

Valve has supported this project quite heavily, bringing it onto the Steam service in line with other high profile mods like Counterstrike and Frontline Force. There's already been some contention over Natural Selection concept and content, with Fox Interactive clearly combative about it, announcing a new game in their AVP series using the same name as this mod, which they then changed to "Aliens vs. Predator: Primal Hunt". It'll be interesting to see if the retail product can compete with this fervent community effort.

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Online World Tour

Wouldn't it be wonderful if reality could be changed as easily as a massively multiplayer role-playing game? **George Soropos** investigates the evolving nature of online worlds...

Say you really didn't like going to work every day you could log on to the 'God' forum and get him to change your career path over to 'retired billionaire' or 'hot movie star'.

If you're irked by how easily your neighbour produces award winning roses you could perhaps petition to get his gardening skills nerfed, as they are 'obviously' unfair, unbalanced and just plain un-everything. Many such changes have been happening in our favourite virtual worlds both old and new so we thought we'd have a look at where things are heading and whether or not anyone wants to go along for the ride.

Ultima Online

Publisher: Electronic Arts

While not the oldest MMORPG around, it is generally considered to be one of the founding fathers, and the fact that it still has hundreds of thousands of players shows that the development team have been able to keep them interested with regular updates and events. The biggest news to hit the UO community in a long time, if not ever, was the announcement that EA was closing down Origin, the developers of UO, and moving some operations to another location. The real impact of this move has yet to be felt with EA continuing to provide support for the game but the developers are now scattered between EA's new base and their previous home in Austin Texas.

These moves don't seem to have disturbed the flow of updates with a new expansion planned for later in the year. The as yet unnamed add-on will feature new player versus player content, two new professions and a new land to traverse. There will also be some new decorating options for players' houses. This announcement was made after the relocation news so the release should go as planned.

Special events are also still being organised by the team working on the game. The Moonglow Festival is one such event, scheduled for the 3rd of April on the Trammel facet of most shards. The festival features contests of skill and the fighting arts, free mending for the clumsy, an epic sea battle and even a parade among other things.

FOR

Big helpful community
Loads of info and tutorials on a pile of websites everywhere
Low system specs

AGAINST

Need a broadband connection as even closest servers are a bit laggy
Uncertain update schedule with change of owners

Everquest

Publisher: Sony Online/Ubisoft

Another granddaddy of the industry, Everquest has had the most major expansions and add-ons of all the MMORPGs around and continues to have one of the biggest gaming communities online. The biggest news on the Everquest scene of late has been the new Gates of Discord Expansion, and in particular the new Berzerker class that came with it.

While some players are happy with having a new character class to play with many have also been disappointed with the implementation. The lack of innate critical attacks featured in other melee classes has annoyed a few people and the poor damage given out by throwing axes is another common beef. As yet there is also a lack of specific Berzerker weapons that take advantage of the classes particular skills.

The new tradeskill system introduced with the Gates expansion has also left a bad taste in some players mouths as it has introduced some oddities into the game where 'known recipes' and potions won't appear in a players alchemist list even though they had them before the expansion.

On a more positive note all the melee classes are undergoing a slight rejig in order to balance the game as a whole and most melee players are finding their characters are benefiting nicely from this. As a response to player requests, Sony Online hopes to soon add another feature to leave corpses around a bit longer (they have the oddest wish list these people). A graveyard will be added to each area so that old corpses can be reclaimed by their forgetful owners!

FOR

Similar to UO in size of community and support available
3D game world,
Lots of Updates

AGAINST

Can be a bit daunting to the beginner
One of the more costly subscriptions around

Dark Age of Camelot

Publisher: Mythic Entertainment

DAoC, as it is known, doesn't have the history of UO or Everquest, but has built up quite a big following both here and overseas. The big news in the world of Camelot right now is the development of New Frontiers, the next major update to the game. It is planned that within New Frontiers players will find more strategic geography, more movement abilities, and expanded keep building options and revised siege capabilities, all intended to make Realm versus Realm battles more accessible.

However most current players are more interested in the complete overhaul of the Realm Abilities system introduced over a year ago which will also be a part of New Frontiers. Realm Abilities were intended to give Realm versus Realm battles more depth, fun and also to give players more reason to get involved. However they added an unbalancing effect to many of the character classes and have been the cause of much bickering and complaint over the last year or so. This is going to be the single biggest overhaul in the game's history to date.

That comes on the heels of what has been another major update in the form of the 1.68 patch which has tweaked and fixed bugs and oddities with a mass of items and artifacts too numerous to list here (a full list of fixes can be found at http://forums2.warcry.com/forum.php?f=104). Mythic seems intent

on keeping players happy and the New Frontiers expansion should keep DAoC at the forefront of the MMORPG world.

FOR
Interesting game structure with Realm versus Realm play
Regular updates
Japanese servers closer than most
AGAINST
Soloing is more difficult in DAoC than in a lot of other MMORPG's

Asheron's Call 2
Publisher: Turbine Entertainment

The world of Asheron's Call is in the throes of corporate turmoil as Microsoft, the original publisher, has recently sold the franchise of the game back to its developer, Turbine Entertainment. The two companies had been partners since 1996, and launched the first in the series in 1999. Turbine now exclusively owns Asheron's Call, but Microsoft will keep providing testing and billing services during the changeover period.

Asheron's Call 2 has also recently undergone a major update with game balancing the main issue being addressed. Previously some classes have been able to 'cheat' a little by run-casting, which is casting spells while moving around. The new patch has curtailed this somewhat dubious activity so that battles should now be more sensible affairs, with a noticeable reduction in the number of gibbering maniacs running around waving their hands in the air and chanting things. In other words battles should look more like battles and less like nightclub dance floors. Of course players who've been benefiting from this activity have been complaining hard on AC2's forums but most have welcomed the rebalancing act.

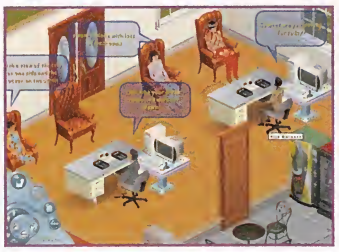
With no distributor at the moment the game has actually been unavailable for sale for a few months however by the time this article goes to print you should be able to get the game directly from Turbine (http://www.turbinegames.com)

FOR
Great player community
Lots of story events and quests

AGAINST
Uncertain future with ownership changing hands

Star Wars Galaxies
Publisher: LucasArts

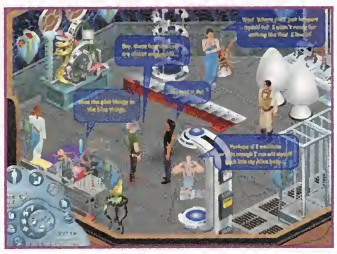
Galaxies has probably been the most entertaining MMORPG ever made for people who don't actually play the game. When the beta finally went public the official forums were probably the most



bitter and spiteful place on planet Earth. Forget Israel and Palestine, these people were miffed!

The game was pretty obviously released too early and the lack of content and game balance provided the inspiration for some of the hottest flame wars and put-downs in gaming history. So much so that Sony Online ended up restricting even the viewing of the official forums to people who were already playing the game. Some say this was an attempt to stop potential customers from seeing the complaints while Sony used the argument that posts from non players were wasting too much time for the admins and distorting the image of the game.

While the argument is still raging, there have been a lot of patches and tweaks to Galaxies since then so how do people feel about the game now? Oddly enough, not much better. The general mood was in fact on the



way up with more content and rebalancing clearing up some of the main problems for players, however a recent and totally inept marketing ploy by Lucas Arts, which is unconnected to Sony Online's own marketing of the game, has caused a lot of grief to re-emerge. It all came about with the launch of this site: http://www.lucasarts.com/products/galaxies/ which is essentially an online ad for the game. Lucas Arts have placed a cut-scene movie on this site to 'show off' Galaxies in a way that many players have found highly offensive. The crux of the problem is that the movie shows Jedi characters (the most marketable characters after all) everywhere, in almost every scene, even though they are as rare as hens teeth in the actual game and very, very difficult to develop.

For many players this has brought back all their old memories of disappointment with the initial

game and made them suspicious of the commercial motives behind the site. All this bad feeling between publisher/developer and the gamers themselves has not led to the creation of a really cohesive community, something that seems a long way down the track for Galaxies.

FOR
Great 3D graphics
Vehicle transport
It's Star Wars

AGAINST
Design still unbalanced in many areas
Generally unhappy community of players

The Sims Online
Publisher: Electronic Arts

Many people scoffed at the idea of The Sims Online, but the game has grown into one of the most popular MMORPGs out there. There have been some fun new additions to the game recently and some major changes are in the works for your Sims.

Probably the best new feature has been the Nightclub with its DJ and Dancer interactions. Nightclubs allow players to mix their favourite Sims tunes and try and gauge what the crowd is into at the time. The more in tune with the crowd you are the more dancers will hit the floor. There are other DJs in each club as well and your goal is to have the most dancers at your booth, not theirs. It is also much better to have real players rather than NPCs dancing to your mix. Dancers and DJs can also work together to get a crowd really fired up. The more players spend time on your part of the dancefloor, the more Simoleons you get paid at the end of the gig.

There are some big changes to the way that relationships work in the game currently in development. Previously a Sim's relationship to another Sim was based on the "make friend" and "make enemy" interactions alone. A lot of players complained that this made it too easy to abuse the system thanks to the practice of "red-linking". Currently it is very easy to create enemies for another player using the 'make enemy' interactions (red-linking). This will no longer be possible in the new relationship system. The hope is that players will be encouraged to 'be nice' to each other instead of indulging in malignant sabotage.

FOR
Great social interaction, low specs and internet connection OK, regular updates
AGAINST
Community varies greatly, can be nice or can be nasty!

GARAGE GAMES

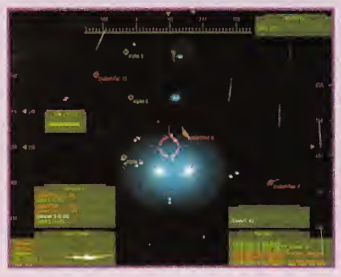
Into the unknown with George Soropos

I'VE FOUND HER

Developer: Space Dream Factory **Genre:** Space Shooter **URL:** http://ifh.firstones.com/

A long time ago, in industry terms at least, a company then known as Sierra announced that they were making a game based on the Babylon 5 universe created by J. Michael Straczynski. Fans were pleased. Space Shooter devotees were intrigued. The Stock Market waited with baited breath to see how fast Sierra's share price would soar to giddy heights. Sadly however, and after teasing everyone by showing off a nearly finished game at E3 in 1998, Sierra announced that it was abandoning the title due to financial problems, or in real persons lingo, they'd made too many fishing and drag racing games.

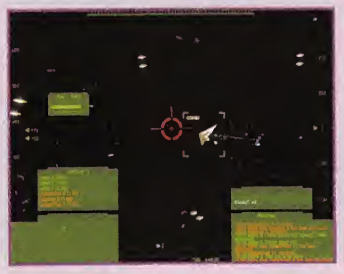
Programmer and writer Oleg Petrov had already made a start on gathering the Space Dream Factory team together at this point and had written a story which eventually developed into a full blown Babylon 5 3D project. Two other teams began similar projects, the Budha5 group and The Babylon Project using the I-War 2 and Freespace 2 engines respectively. To their credit those two groups are still plugging away and developing their projects.



Download: http://ifh.firstones.com/

Space Dream Factory however have not only developed their own 3D engine for their game but now have a fully working multi mission preview ready for download. The story is set five years after the Earth Minbari war, before Babylon 5 has been built, and aboard the EAS Perseus destroyer which acts as your home base. The action is divided between a very well made tutorial mission and a long and involved single player mission which is planned to be the first of many to come. Actually there may be more than one proper mission here but we don't want to spoil the surprise.

The game itself plays a lot like the I-War series in the sense that it use true 3D physics (your ship has true momentum and there is no friction or other causes of unnatural energy loss) and has a plethora of auto pilot options similar in nature to the I-War titles. Hyperspace travel is quite different from anything seen before however. Instead of being just a jump point from one part of space to another, Hyperspace has to actually be navigated, as in the TV series, using beacons and can be quite a tricky, not to mention spooky, experience.



The development team have gotten together from all parts of the globe, Petrov is a Czech, sound designer Yogi Loeschner a German, 3D artists Maclellan and Nordgren from the UK and Sweden respectively, they've even got a web master, Stian Thomassen, from our own humble shores. The voice acting, which is better than we've heard in some commercial titles, has been done by volunteers also from all over the place. IFH is a real multinational effort.

As an ongoing project I've Found Her gives players a chance to interact with the developers and throw in ideas that might influence how the finished game comes together. The forums are quite active and the developers seem keen to listen. If you have some skills with Lightwave or 3D Max you might even be able to help out.

There are a few bugs in the code as you might expect from such a technically advanced garage game however we didn't come across any mission stopping problems and there is already a small patch available to fix most of them. If you are a fan of the series or just of space shooters in general IFH is definitely worth a download.

BOOTCAMP

Online Tips and Tactics

AMERICA'S ARMY

So, you want to rule the American Army battlefield? Well, you'd better get down and give Ed Dawson INFINITY!

Training

America's Army is one of the few games that actually forces you to go through a Boot Camp phase. If you don't get through the training, you can't mobilise and play online. So! Pay attention! Initially you must pass the marksmanship course. When looking down the America's Army iron sights, your breathing has quite an impact on your aim. So turn the sound up, and listen for when your soldier breathes out. At the top of his breath, and during the exhalation, your accuracy is much improved. During his wheezy breathing in, it's much worse. So, just pause for those few microseconds. To get into Sniper School, you've got to hit 36 out of 40 targets. You're only given 40 rounds, so you can only miss four shots. Persevere! The rest of your training should be routine. Listen to the instructions, and do what they say!

Honour (also, 'Honor')

You retain this value over time and contribute to it throughout your online career. Honour levels are used to control player skill levels on servers. Each level is comprised of hundreds of points (many thousands, from levels 30-99), while each game only gives you the chance to win up to around 100 points – and that's if you were the squad leader, killed everyone, personally secured all the objectives, then eliminated all of the opposition. Your honour level decreases when you wound or eliminate your own team members, are kicked from a server for the aforementioned, or get killed, harshly enough. It's worth noting that you have to play ten rounds in a row to have your honour score updated.

Regular Combat

America's Army plays a bit like a slowed-down Counter-Strike. Many of the same tactics are useful, but staying together in a squad is definitely paramount. Always advance together, and defend players who are completing the objectives.

Sniping

The M82 and M24 rifles are overwhelmingly powerful in the right hands. Obviously you should be prone at all times while firing and remember what we said about breathing. Listen to your breaths, and fire on the exhale. As a sniper, your accuracy is determined by your health. So, once you've been badly injured, your effectiveness won't be the same – probably better to pick up another weapon and join the fray.

Suppressing

Using the SAW to pin down your enemies is an important role, especially on maps where there are big choke points. However, be mindful of the fact that your copious volleys of tracer rounds will always give away your position.

Bombarding

The M203 and M79 give you the ability to hit your enemies at extreme range, even behind cover. The effectiveness of this is such that you shouldn't miss your opportunity to fire these rounds – best to send off a few in the first moments of combat, when the enemy is bunched together. You might get lucky. Better to have fired it and missed, than to die without having launched them.

Anti-lag

Finally, all the "Honor" and training in the world won't prepare you for the soldier's worst nightmare, LAG. Unfortunately America's Army is a game that suffers from lag more than most other titles, even over broadband. Firstly, find a server as close to 100 ping or less as possible. Then use these console commands: **"Stat Net"** – displays information about your connection, and net speed setting. "Flush" – clears a cache, and sometimes helps. **"Netspeed x"** – (start at 7000 or so for broadband users) where x is the number you want to set. Try decreasing your netspeed in increments of 500 until the motion appears smooth.

You tried to rush, didn't you fool

THE PCPP INTERVIEW

He helped to bash out Fallout and Planescape, now he's in on the ground floor for a brand new company. This month, we talk story and design with Chris Avellone.

Curriculum Vitae

Name: **Chris Avellone**
Title: **Game Designer/ Writer/ Co-Founder**
Company: **Obsidian Entertainment**
Location: **Orange County, California**
Projects: **Planescape Torment, Fallout 2, Icewind Dale 1 & 2, Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance, Lionheart**

A lot of us at PCPP are nutty over the writing in your games. How do you do it?
With game stories, always start from the beginning - the player. The player is the gravity around which everything in the narrative should rotate (or eventually rotate). We tried to make sure this was the case in Planescape: Torment, and we made the whole goal of the game be about the player's personal discovery - almost everyone and everything the player encountered put another puzzle piece into place for his existence. I think the key to a strong narrative lies in answering just one question: "Why should the player care?" If you ask yourself this every time you script an NPC, a quest, or a cut scene, and ANSWER it, then you're on the way to crafting a good narrative - and even better, a good motivation. Granted, there's a lot to be said for execution, but you need a good foundation.
Another key to a strong narrative is reactivity. The more the narrative (and the world and environment) responds to things the player's actions, abilities, or skills, the better - it makes the player feel more special, and more like his actions mean something. Reactivity can range from something as "simple" as being able to blow up a wall or a building with a bazooka to talking an NPC into putting down his sword and surrendering with a high Speech skill.
And maybe last of all, make sure you take that reactivity and when you can, use it to stroke the player's ego. The narrative and flow of the narrative is to compliment the player's style of play (whatever it is), and deliver a power fantasy. Some players want to be smooth-talkers, able to disarm a crew of gun-wielding thugs with some fancy talk, others want to be sneaky thieves, able to rob their enemies blind so when they reach for their weapons they're grabbing air, and others just want to mow through their opponents and adversaries like a lawnmower, tearing apart everything in their path while bystanders run away screaming. Try to give a player options to how he can express himself in the game world and the story, and you have the one of the keys in making a strong narrative.

How important is the story to a game? Do you think that computer games have explored the notion of interactive story-telling far enough?
Gameplay always comes first - story's quite a few rungs down the ladder from that. Story's still an important part of any RPG, but the bottom line is that if a game isn't fun to play, a good story's just perfume on a trash heap.
I don't think computer games have been able to explore the notion of interactive story-telling just because of resources. It takes a lot to craft an open-ended game that offers a player a lot of interactivity and a lot of choices. When we were working on the Jefferson Project at Black Isle Studios, the sheer amount of player choices available in the game was staggering, and it required the full-time efforts of the 5-6 designers on the project just to flesh out each area, plus a few programmers dedicated to scripting these areas to make them behave properly.

In your opinion what are the keys to designing a great game? Do you have mental checklist?
Some keys to designing a great game are (in no particular order):
(1) Have a good high concept or theme - make sure you're striving for something new in the game or gameplay rather than re-treading the same path as previous games,
(2) test the hell out of it until everything that irritates you is gone,
(3) watch other people play your game and edit yourself until everything that irritates them is gone,
(4) make sure you understand why your game is going to be fun and focus on those elements,
(5) make sure the interface is as unobtrusive and helpful as possible, and (6) gather a team of enthusiastic people with good communication skills that share a common vision. The team's probably the most important part of any game design - there's really nothing more powerful in making a great game than having everyone excited and pushing themselves in a common direction.

Are there any basic, bone-head, design moves that you see all the time that really get to you? Please share them with us.
Fetch quests that make you run across three or more maps and seem solely designed to waste your time. That, and "get the key" quests. I think there's more imaginative ways to design quests without using either of those elements.

How do you rate the progress that the industry has made in the past 5 years (say, since Fallout 2)? Why?
It depends. I focus mostly on single-player RPGs and I hold the standard of comparison against Ultima Underworld 1. I'd love to see a modern game that can pull off what Underworld 1 did with today's technology. Of course, I'm biased as hell because I love that game, but there you go. I think Fallout went a long way to changing the face of RPG with its non-linearity, and I do think Neverwinter Nights GMing system was revolutionary (and long overdue). I also think massively multiplayer on-line games provide a more real RPG experience than most single-player games simply because you are interacting with real people as opposed to scripted events and scripted NPCs. The sheer amount of non-linearity, reactivity, and politics has the potential to deliver a better RPG experience than most solo games, but it all depends on how you like to play.
Anyway, that's just my 2 cents.

If you could magically revolutionise computer games what would you do?
There's a few things:
I would love it if popular culture came around to viewing computer games as a form of art. I think games deserve it.
I would love the ability to dump artificial AIs into CRPGs that would act as truly reactionary gamemasters to players while playing the CRPG.
And lastly, I would love to invent a machine that I could plug into my head and dump all my thoughts into a game editor or turn them into rendered movies, and that would probably be enough for me.

With code being written from scratch for each project, wildly inaccurate project schedules and a huge variation in the quality of top-end products, is it safe to say that the process of making games hasn't advanced as quickly as the technology?
Everything is changing so much in making games over the past 20 years, it's hard to keep pace with technology. Developer roles in computer games keep becoming more and more specialized that we're almost constantly re-evaluating the process of making games. Plus, add the fact that every game comes with its share of X factors and unknowns, it's just hard to predict exactly how long a game needs to cook before it's done.
Anyway, just my thoughts. Keep in mind I'm old and cranky, and my best years are behind me. ;)

After the problems that brought Black Isle down, what excited you most about founding a company like Obsidian? How will Obsidian stand out amongst the crowd?
What excited me the most was just the chance to jump in and make CRPGs - and have more control over the kinds and quality of the RPGs we make. At Interplay, we were often at the mercy of financial hardship and other circumstances that would often determine the kind of game we made... and also made it hard to determine if anything we worked on would actually see the light of day. It was somewhat demoralizing from a developer standpoint. At Obsidian, I'm not worried about either of those concerns, and we've been getting a lot of support from the publishers we're working with now.
I think Obsidian will stand out amongst the crowd in that we'll be making good, solid RPGs that we love making and we've always wanted to make. A lot of our employees are from Black Isle Studios, and I think once separated from the financial and management concerns that tended to shackle the games we made, the freedom to do what we want will really shine through.

THE DISC

REQUESTS

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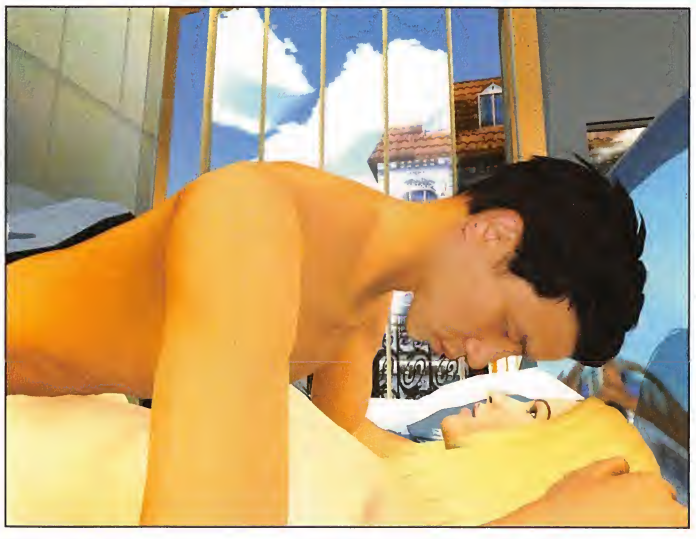


This month we see the return of the manga episodes. Hooray! The movie this month is the first episode of Blue Gender. Aside from the DVD movie, we also have the usual collection of demos, mods and patches.

There are total of 12 demos this month, one of them is UT 2004. As one of the major demos to be released recently, it receives a place in the Spotlight section. There are also several trailers to watch. Driv3r, Far Cry, Hitman: Contracts and Vampire: Masquerade - Bloodlines are some of the game movies featured this month.

UT 2004 isn't the only good demo this month; there is also a demo of Colin McRae Rally 04 for the rally fan. There's some dead man action with demos for Drake of the 99 Dragons and Painkiller. Both games have main characters that are dead in some way. You can also try out some gangster mayhem with Gangland. We also have the return of Sonic the Hedgehog in the demo for Sonic Adventure DX.

There are 7 new or updated utilities in the Utilities section. One of the new/updated files is Winzip 9.0. Mods Plus and Patches as usual have files that will add that new dimension to your favourite games.

The CD version of the magazine has the small freeware games as well as mods, patches and utilities. Hopefully this will keep everybody happy.

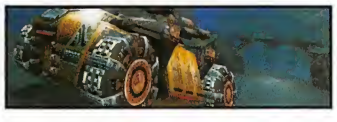
That's all for this month, I've got to get back to my lady.

Amos Hong
Disc Master
cdgod@next.com.au

DVD CONTENTS

SPOTLIGHT/ MOVIES
Blue Gender - DVD Episode
Unreal Tournament 2004

TRAILERS
Dead Man's Hand
Driv3r Movie
Driv3r "Run the GAUNTLET" Trailer
Far Cry Official Trailer
Hitman: Contracts



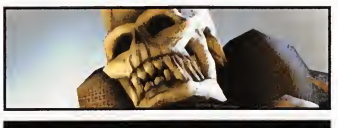
Silent Hill 4
Star Wars Galaxies Hour Trailer
The Sims 2
Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines #1
Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines #2
Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines #3

DEMOS
Colin McRae Rally 04
Conan
Drake of the 99 Dragons
Gangland
Hidden & Dangerous 2 [SP & MP]
Jack the Ripper
Nemesis of the Roman Empire
Painkiller
Sonic Adventure DX
X2 - The Threat Unit

MODS
EDesert Combat Extended v7.1 [DC > BF:1942]
The Equilibris [HoMaMIV]
Jupiter Effect: Influx [UT2003]
Natural Selection v3.0 [HL]

PATCHES
Devastation v390
Delta Force: Land Warrior 1.00.42
Halo v1.0 - 1.04
Deus Ex: Invisible War v1.2 [US]
Spellforce: The Order of the Dawn v1.05
Universal Combat v1.00.02 RC 1
Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun v1.03

UTILITIES
GameSpy Arcade v1.4c
Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 4.2 7.98
Ostat 0.32
SANDRA Standard 2004 SP1
Winamp 5.02
WinRAR 3.3
WinZip 9.0
Advanced Zip Repair
DivX Player (with DivX Codec) 5.1.1
DirectX 9.0b
Windows Media Player 9
Zip Repair



CD CONTENTS

CD 1
DEMOS
Colin McRae Rally 04
Hidden and Dangerous 2 [SP]
Unreal Tournament 2004

TRAILERS
Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines #1
Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines #2
Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines #3

FREE GAMES
Cube
Gene Rally

When Obese Turtles Attack
Hitball2
Liero AI
Toy Trouble
Trash Killer 2

CD 2
DEMOS
Painkiller
X2 - The Threat

MODS
Desert Combat Extended v7.1 [DC > BF:1942]
The Equilibris [HoMaMIV]
Jupiter Effect: Influx [UT2003]

PATCHES
Halo v1.0 - 1.04
Deus Ex: Invisible War v1.2 [US]
Spellforce: The Order of the Dawn v1.05
Universal Combat v1.00.02 RC 1

UTILITIES
GameSpy Arcade v1.4c
Winamp 5.02
WinRAR 3.3
WinZip 9.0

NEXT MONTH

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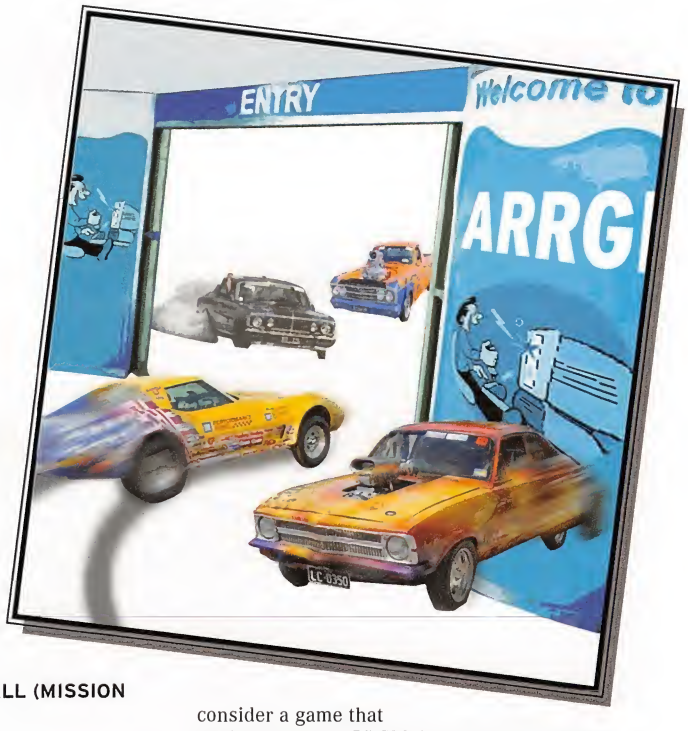

The other night the boots took me aside and casually mentioned that although I've attempted on many occasions to provide some kind of coverage of the various gaming festivals the boots and I regularly attend, such 'coverage' has almost always focused more on the fire-starting antics of my colleagues in the press and less on the actual games.

In order to somehow rectify this, I immediately registered via the web for Australia's newest independent games show, the Australian Amateur Games Hithereathon. This last word, Hithereathon, is possibly not one you've encountered before. See, the organisers of AAGH! (their exclamation point, not mine) had recently read mediafamily.org's eighth annual games industry report card and noted that the organisation had coined the term "killographic" to describe a game that was explicitly violent, in much the same way that we use pornographic to mean explicitly sexual. Rather than taking this to mean that games were too violent, AAGH! took it to mean that it was now acceptable to just make up words. Thus, Hithereathon.

Organisation spokesperson Alby Twickfiddler explained the rationalisation behind the word. "We wanted something that naturally implied a meeting, a gathering of minds, but we didn't want to likewise imply the gross commercialism that words like 'convention' or 'expo' immediately conjure. Thus, Hithereathon."

Whatever the wording, the thing was held at Canberra's exhibition park, which the administrators call the Exhibition Park in Canberra so that they, like AAGH! can have a cool acronym. For some reason, AAGH! decided to hold their festival on the same weekend as the Summernats, so EPIC was packed to the gills with fast cards, wild paintjobs and women wearing nothing but stone-washed levis and a pair of fluffy dice.

However, thanks to a warning growl from the boots, I was determined to cover the games. The actual games being exhibited. Nothing else. Not the burnouts. Not the sausage-sizzles. Not the wet T-shirt competitions. Summernats was ostensibly a family weekend, but AAGH! was for gamers. The booth-babes were of an entirely different calibre.

Anyway, before I was completely overcome by carbon-monoxide poisoning and AC/DC tribute bands, I managed to visit and interact with the developers of the following, mildly exciting titles.

CROCODILE BREEDING TYCOON

Developer: Foetus Muncher
Distributor: Blind Drunk Due: TBA

A 3D crocodile breeding game. There isn't much more to be said - the player takes control of a down-and-out Queensland croc farm and by combining judicious publicity stunts with an international wildlife documentary media empire, makes not only a bazillion dollars but also breeds increasingly vicious saltwater crocodiles. Eventually, they're able to take over a small Pacific island with their croc armies and proclaim themselves the Lizard King. Then the yanks firebomb them back into the Stone Age. Great for kids.

BASS AVENGER KISS PINBALL (MISSION HUMANITY VERSION)

Developer: Vas Deferens
Distributor: Blind Drunk Due: Q3 2034

Combining the very worst aspects of the very worst games ever reviewed by PCPP, lead programmer Andi Valkswivmi says he and his team of eighty-seven dedicated programmers are aiming for the coveted "1%" score in this magazine. "It's one thing to get a 98%. But so many games get 98%. Who remembers them? No one. What people remember are the low scores. It's 1% for us or nothing. Actually, nothing would be great. Any chance of getting nothing?" he says. I told him he needs to integrate a Tau Firewarrior somehow, then we can talk.

THE LOVE SONG OF WILLIAM H LIABILITY

Developer: Psycho Phants
Distributor: Blind Drunk
Due: Christmas, with bells on

My old friend William Liability, CEO and sole stockholder of Blind Drunk, distributor of fine electronic entertainment products (the company hopes to ship their very first product any day now) is very excited about this upcoming graphical adventure about his life, developed by his own cousin Stan "Psycho" Liability. Using state-of-the-art hand drawn backgrounds and licensing for more than sixteen major beer manufacturers, Psycho Phants promises this game will rival even Planescape Torment for meaningful NPC interaction. "You can get drunk and punch people in the face," says Stan.

Porn Masters

Developer: T&A
Distributor: Blind Drunk Due: Q4 2240

T&A has pencilled out a 220 year development cycle for Porn Masters because they believe that's how long it will be before the Australian Office of Film and Literature Classification will be ready, culturally and ideologically, to consider a game that depicts hardcore BDSM, homosexuality (the real kind, not just the two hot babes going down on each other kind) and adult themes such as tax evasion. Ironically, even though the male and female player models in the game engage in explicit sex, the women's breasts are of a normal size and the men's torsos do not look like the sick result of some new kind of experimental weightlifting steroid.

Sandal Saviours

Developer: Emily Smitten (indie)
Distributor: Emily Smitten Due: 2005

When I got to this booth things suddenly became very, very awkward. The boots and I had once visited Emily Smitten when she was developing her power-walking simulator. Apparently, since then, she's gone and got religion. Unfortunately, her new outlook of peace and love didn't stop her launching right into me when I appeared, unprepared and unforwarned, at her booth.

"Why didn't you call me?" she demanded.

"I lost your number?" I hazarded.

Meanwhile, her low-impact pumps had caught sight of the boots again and were already trying to inch their way closer for a little bit of surreptitious footwear hanky-panky. You know how shoes are - leave them together in a wardrobe for a month and when you next look your attractive and stylish leisure shoes have somehow bred with your daggy Dunlop Volleys to create a hideous hybrid no stylish person would ever be seen dead in.

At this point in my coverage of AAGH! my notes ran out. However, I do recall, dimly, that I had to buy William Liability a great many drinks as payment for him appearing at my elbow at that moment and guiding me gently away to see some thing where barbarians hit each other with axes. I think it was called Barbarian Axe Battle 3D. I dunno. By then I was really, really drunk.

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